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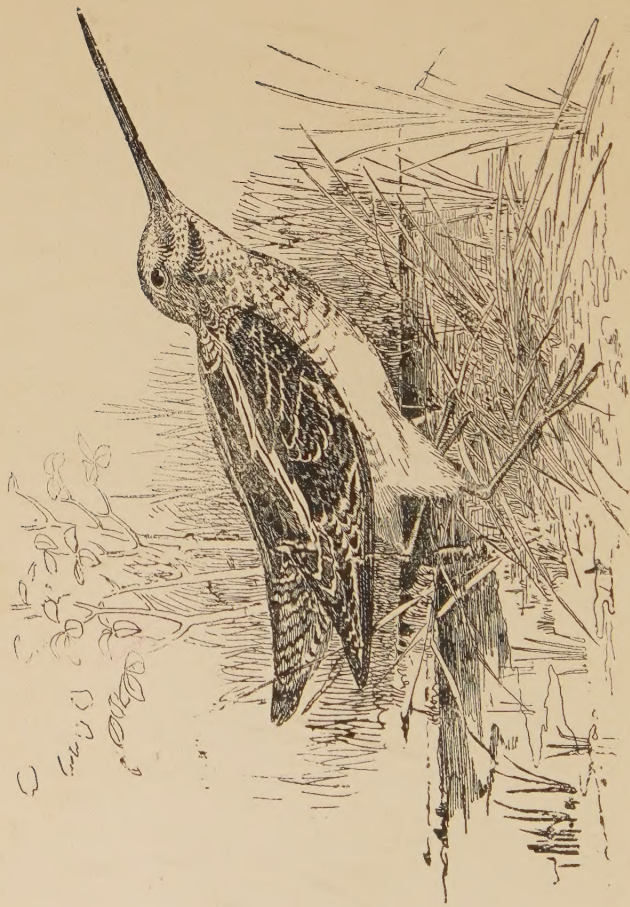
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English Snipe.

BIRD-LAND ECHOES

BY

CHARLES CONRAD ABBOTT, M.D.

Author of "Recent Rambles," "Travels in a Tree-
Top," "The Birds About Us," "A
Colonial Wooing," etc.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY

WILLIAM EVERETT CRAM



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1901

PHILADELPHIA

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1901

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INTRODUCTION.

I LOVE all birds, whether they are commonplace or rare, stupid or entertaining, gentle or vicious, large or small. They make alive the earth and the air as does no other class of living creatures. The water may teem with fish, the grass with frogs, the trees with squirrels, the air with butterflies, and yet we may look upon all this with half-hearted interest, if not positive indifference. Any one of these forms of life may command our attention for the time, but we cannot live among them for weeks without wearying. It is not so with birds. Whether the fierce eagle that defies the sun or homely sparrow in the weedy hedge, the clamorous gull above the ocean's roar or whistling sand-piper tripping by the brook, alike they draw us to them; they bid us pause, whatever our occupation at the time; no rut so deep but they can divert our thoughts from it; we never tire of listening and looking. Both eye and ear revel in what the wild bird does and says. In a manner, we can comprehend all other forms of life; the bird is the one great mystery of creation.

Even those most prominent in our daily walks do not become monotonous. The sparrows that we

saw yesterday and have seen for years are as charming to-day. With ever new delight we watch

With what hot haste they tumble headlong through
The tangled vines and long grass wet with dew ;
In madcap chase rise to the outer air,
Glint in the sunshine, singing everywhere.

To treat of the ornithology of a few acres and yet group the birds "geographically" rather than "systematically" may seem somewhat of a vagary, and it remains with the reader to decide whether this method be the wiser one ; but I have long thought that a literally natural system is that which is the daily experience of those who live in the country, and the plan has much to commend it. There is no spot but is the favorite one, not of a single, but of several wholly unrelated species, and, just as the sportsman speaks of the "reed" and "rail" of the meadows, I have grouped the birds of the mill-pond, the lowlands, the fields, the woods, and even the dusty highways. Birds that voluntarily associate are not separated in the mind of him who takes a quiet stroll of a summer evening or rambles during his vacation days.

What the birds' status is in the hand-books matters little to most people, not even if, to further befog the subject, a "quadrinomial nomenclature for elucidating identification" be attached thereto. There is happily a wide-spread impression that birds are something more than mere "specimens" whereupon distorting taxidermy has exercised its appalling lack of skill. Even the alien sparrows of the streets give

the lie to museums, or people might well turn from ornithology with feelings akin to disgust. As it is, the woods, fields, mountain-sides, and river-valleys tell another and a charming story, of which, I would be glad to think, the pages that follow give back a faint echo.

However this may prove, the portraits of birds here given, from the skilful hand of my friend William Everett Cram, tell their own story. They are speaking likenesses that call for no explanatory text.

CHARLES CONRAD ABBOTT.

THREE BEECHES, January 19, 1896.



Hermit Thrush. (See page 101.)



BIRD-LAND ECHOES.

CHAPTER I.

THE INSPIRING SPARROWS.

I STAND tiptoe upon the edge of the morning and overlook an unawakened world. The old oaks are dimly gray as dungeon walls. The prowling opossum and wily weasel have long since finished their nightly rounds and every flying squirrel is asleep in his home-tree. It is neither night nor day, but those intervening moments when we fancy there is a hush before the new activities commence. A sparrow yawns as I brush against its roosting-place, and a drawling chirp dribbles from its beak. There is no repetition of the sound, and doubtless the bird's head is again under its wing. For once I am ahead of time, and arrange my plans, but am cut down in my pride by a robin, as usual, that has stolen a march on me, and now his ringing cry struggles earthward through the misty air. The bird is as yet a mere matter of sound, and eyes go for

nothing. Do these ever-present thrushes know our purposes, and sit up all night that they may anticipate us? I have never yet whistled to my dog before some robin has whistled to the wind. But better next to the head than at the tail of the procession. I had come out this misty, warm, unseasonable December morning to see at closer hand the many sparrows that had thronged the hedges and tangled nooks and corners of neglected fields the day before. As day drew on apace they threw off their sleepiness, and everywhere the quiet country trembled with the melody of their united voices. There were sparrows from the mountains that had come to winter with us; there were others that prefer these old haunts of mine to any other spot, and, be it cold as ice or hot as the summer's sun can make it, are never driven from their nesting sites. Here and there was an overstaying bird, its fellows generally having gone southward weeks before, and one great flock of thistle-finches, in coats as rusty as dead leaves, held to the tree-tops as if ever on the lookout for news to convey to their hedge-haunting cousins; but I did not see that the latter regarded them as sentinels. It was essentially a sparrow day, such as I have often seen before, but never to such excellent advantage.

The sun, like a tarnished silver disk, shone through a veiling of ashen clouds. The all-pervading light came apparently directly from the frost-encrystalled ground, and there were no shadows. Not a leaf stirred of those still clinging to the trees nor skeleton

of a last summer's weed bent to the passing breeze. Silence everywhere, save when dispelled by the fitful chirping and twittering of the birds. It proved to be a model winter day, but because of this do not think I had but to walk up to any one or all of these sparrows and bid them "good-morning." They are never disposed to hold direct communication. Your experience is likely to be, at best, but a long catalogue of glimpses, and it depends upon yourself how much of the bird's doings you have gathered in the fraction of a minute. Your patience is sorely tried; but if you have pluck, the scattered observations can be collected in your hours of reflection, and at last you will be able to assert with confidence whether it was a song-sparrow or a tree-sparrow that seemed to walk on three legs through the air, so limb-like was the motion of the tail. When you can command the use of both eyes and ears the initial problem of identification becomes much easier. Not that every utterance can be recognized, beyond the bald fact that it is a bird-note. Widely differing species chirp and chatter in essentially the same way, and sometimes the unthinking rambler may be looking for a bird when a little tree-toad is sounding the clear call that lures him on.

This host of sparrows this morning were full of life, and what were they doing? It is a natural question, for usually you do not find birds idle; but, like many another inquiry, more easily asked than answered. They were pre-eminently restless. At first I thought it was but a loose flock that came

and went, but this was not the case. There was a continual accession of individuals and a stream of departing birds having a southward drift. There was nothing of a migratory character in this, for, though I write now of a mid-December day, it is as likely to be witnessed a month or two months later as now. These birds simply come and go. Here to-day and gone to-morrow is the burden of the rambler's field-notes, if not of the songs of the birds as they flit by you.

Finding a comfortable seat, I awaited their coming, for pursuit is fruitless even when practicable; but here the briars were too thick-set for human progress. That the birds were hungry seemed probable from the fact that most of them were on the ground and the scratching among dead leaves was clearly heard. The vesper-sparrows that all summer long had enlivened every upland field were now in friendly association with the white-throats and a few snow-birds, seeking food in a thicket where they had never ventured before. No fovea was visible, yet at the call of some bird in the open or tall tree above they would rise at the same instant and gather in the bushes. Then I could see what species had assembled there, but before the task of enumeration was complete not one of them would be seen. As quickly as they came they returned. It might have proved monotonous at last, but there came all the glow of summer through this winter sunshine when a song-sparrow, leaving the merry company, perched on a little beech and sang that same sweet song that

brightened even the May mornings when every bird was at its best. I have often wondered why it is that this sparrow forever retains the warmth of summer in its heart, while all its cousins change with the seasons, and, while merry at spring-tide, are contemplative, if not positively gloomy, on the approach of winter. There is no key, perhaps, wherewith to unlock the mystery, so let it rest. Suffice it



Song-sparrow.

to know that, though the hedge is leafless, there is beauty still lingering somewhere about the bare twigs, and the sparrow discovers it and proclaims it, even in the face of the cruellest blast of the heartless north wind. There is no variation in the song ; no less emphasis in December than in June ; at all times it finds the world is good enough and worthy of all praise. Translate this song, if you will, putting it into your own language with all your cunning,

but never can you find one syllable that is not a note of gladness, a hymn of thanksgiving. Wherever the song-sparrow may wander, whenever it is moved to sing, it has but one grand theme,—the grandest, whether of men or birds,—“peace on earth.”

Strangers, however brilliant, should never overshadow your life-long friends. Usually they do, it is sad to think, but not always ; and never a new-comer, whether but a transient guest or a summer-long visitor among the moving mass of north-bound migrating birds, ever thrust the song-sparrow into the shade. I hold well in mind that as the year rolls on those marked celebrities of the melodious host will command greater attention, and we will stand in wide-eyed wonder as their marvellous songs rouse the sleepy echoes in old woods or ring out in mad-cap merriment over sunny fields ; but never will those earlier, anticipatory notes of the steadfast song-sparrow be forgotten. They told of what was coming when it was yet frosty March or dull, damp, dreary April. Our faith was roused (and it needs continual prodding), and that is something of greater worth than anything of which an accomplished task can ever boast. The song-sparrow in the *rôle* of a prophet fills a larger space than the expounder of what is transpiring. The present is ever the one thought of the thrush or the rose-breast, but the unpretending sparrow has had a faith-inspiring glimpse of the future and sings of it in fullest confidence ; and when, some bright May morning, the orchard is in all its glory there is not one bird of

the many hundreds that more gleefully greets the rosy blossoms. It is not less glad because it had a clearer vision of their coming. The *constant* song-sparrow ; that best describes it. It was faithful when few besides had faith ; and now, when the apple-blossoms have fallen, it sings no less cheerfully. The summer's heat may drive it from the upland fields, but it finds the world pleasant in the cooler meadows ; and where the scarlet lobelia stands, a pillar of fire, upon the swift brook's grassy brim, lighting up the weedy wilderness about it, there the same sweet song is uttered in all its earnestness. The falling leaf of October's frosty days brings it no gloomy thoughts. As we gather the hazel-nuts along the hill-foot hedge we hear the same clear notes ringing through the hazy, golden sunshine of the Indian summer, keeping time to the dropping of dark-brown nuts. With the first snow there is the same burst of gladness, a rejoicing that jolly winter with all his sport has come at last ; and with the last storm of the season the sparrow sounds the good news that winter is ready to depart and spring is on the way. Blessed song-sparrows, that ought to keep the whole earth in excellent humor, full of faith and of an ever-abiding hope !

As already mentioned, we have many sparrows, resident and visitors, some of the latter coming only for the summer, others to spend the winter, and not one but has marked features of its own. The little "chippy," for instance, that is at home even in large towns, if there are shade-trees in the streets ; the

field-sparrow that tinkles a silver bell from the day of its arrival to the very hour of its departure, and more than once I have heard in midwinter an over-staying bird ; and the grasshopper-finch that only chirps like the *tsit-tsit* of a cricket, and far oftener runs through the grass like a mouse than takes a bold flight above the weeds and fences. In these same fields there is yet another sparrow that, once pointed out to you, you can never mistake. As it flies the white feathers on the sides of the tail show very plainly, and the chances are that, if you are walking in a lane or along some quiet country by-road, the bird will run before you, keeping in one rut, and, while very near, will always remain just out of reach, sometimes for many minutes together. Then, at times, it will change its tactics and flit along from post to post of the old fence, until you wonder it does not get tired and dive into the grass and hide. It does this at times, and no sparrow knows the fields better or rejoices in them more, as evidenced by the sweet song that it utters when perched upon some low bush or its favorite mullein-stalk.

This sparrow has a long list of names, as bay-winged bunting, grass-finch, rut-runner, and vesper-sparrow. The last I like better than all others, not because the bird is peculiarly associated with the evening, for there are many species that have a strong fancy for the gloaming. The vesper-sparrow is lively enough at noontide ; but if you chance to stroll, some summer evening, over the fields soon after sundown, when birds generally are settling

down for the night, you will hear the clear notes that blend so admirably with the hushed surroundings. It is a charming "good-night" that touches the heart and brings you into closer contact with nature. Much has been written concerning the



Vesper-sparrow.

song of the vesper-bird, but verbal description, however elaborate, fails to convey any satisfactory impression of these wild songs without words. Those who are familiar with the notes of the song-sparrow will recognize a marked general resemblance, yet the two songs are not likely to be confounded. The difference between the morning and evening song of the vesper-sparrow is not so much a reality, I think, as has been asserted, but rather the same utterance gives us a different impression at the close of day from that received if we hear the bird at sunrise. The atmosphere in the evening seems to

strain out every trace of harshness in the song, and we have, as so rarely happens, music set free. But is this not true of many another bird's song? Even the simple notes of the wood-pewee that are positively tiresome at noonday have a soothing sweetness at nightfall that stays our steps and bids us listen for their repetition.

Here the vesper-sparrow is a resident bird as well as migratory, and those that stay throughout the winter are not mute even when the mercury ranges low. How often, after a storm, when the sky was darkly blue and the ground glistened with its covering of snow, have I seen the vesper-sparrow, undaunted by the glare of the mid-day sun, perch upon a crisp outreaching weed, and heard its thanksgiving as it rang, bell-like, in the still air! Only the cutting blasts of the north or east wind seem to silence them, although they are now no such songsters as in summer. These birds forsake the fields only while the storms or high winds last. Where they seek shelter at such times I am not sure, but no bird is more prompt to return when quiet reigns again.

Vesper-sparrows nest upon the ground and in the fields,—off in the middle of the fields at that,—and not among the weeds along the fences. At least, this is the sum of my experience, which is all that concerns me. It is silly to lay down any law concerning birds. They would laugh at us did they know it, for no creatures have stronger wills and exercise them more capriciously. He who has not seen many a contradictory bird has had indifferent

opportunities or has not the knack of seeing them aright. Too often a bird is shot on sight and its habits are guessed at. It is even down in many bird-books that the vesper-sparrow is not one of our winter species. But let us back to the birds. The song-sparrows build near my house,—so near, sometimes, that the shutters shake their nesting sites ; the “chippy” takes to our door-yard trees and bushes, and over the fence, in every field, the vesper-bird and grasshopper-finch and field-sparrow stay and are



Chipping Sparrow.

glad all summer, and the first named all the year ; and when it tires of grass and weedy growths, trips lightly up and down the dusty road, always happy, ever tuneful.

I have spoken frequently of door-yard ornithology, but it is possible to bring the subject still nearer home, and speak of door-step birds. This may be overstepping the mark, but the dear little chestnut-crowned “chippy” comes very near to being a tame wild bird. I believe that, were it not for cats, it would freely feed from the window-sill, if not enter our

doors. In this bird we have an instance of a creature winning its way to our regard without any effort on its part other than the general loveliness of its disposition. It performs no great feats of flight like the swallow ; it builds no conspicuous nest like the oriole ; it sings but the simplest ditty of all our birds ; but it does come to our doors ; it does salute us with a cheerful song ; it offers to be friendly, and so wins our hearts. A homely little bird, I admit, but do our best friends always resemble Apollo Belvidere or Venus Anadyomene ? “ But it don’t sing,” whines some poor town-cooped mortal who has seen no birds beyond a caged canary or a broiled chicken. So much the better. Is there no music in a child’s prattling or the merry laugh of congregated young people or the shout of a boy just out of school ? In all our language there is no such abused word as “ music.” Ask the old man who hears a “ chippy” for the first time in twenty years, and, as he listens, sees the old homestead as plainly as his hands before him,—ask him if there is music in the simple song of this little sparrow, and he will give you the truest possible definition of the word.

Turning in another direction to where there are meadows instead of fields and marshy tracts with quicksands and all manner of treacherous bogs and tangled growths that hide half-stagnant water ; here, with wildness everywhere, many a gentle bird finds a congenial home. In truth, there is nothing forbidding in these waste places. Although unsuited to man’s needs as a home or as land to cultivate,

they are not unsuited to his disposition as a Rambler, and it is upon no fool's errand that you go if you follow the swamp-sparrow wheresoever it may lead you. I have in mind the long-weathered stump of an old water-birch that once was a landmark in the mucky meadow at home. The tall cat-tail and wild rice and rose-mallow clustered about it in summer,



Swamp-sparrow.

and here, or as near as I could get, I would often stop to hear the swamp-sparrow that made it his favorite outlook and sang his few pretty notes which, as all agree, are most appropriately watery notes: drops of water that, falling, break into music. It is useless to hunt or fight even for similes. It is enough to know that the swamp-sparrow pleases all who listen. Just how and in what measure one

must determine for himself; and let those remain in ignorance who will not go to the birds, for no book about birds or bird-music can be more than a finger-post pointing out the way. If any are satisfied with such meagre details they are, to put it mildly, much to be pitied.

The swamp-sparrow usually has a little territory quite to itself, so far as other sparrows are concerned. A single pair will settle in some cozy spot and go the daily rounds of tree, bush, and weedy wilderness of the marsh, and have birds of far different kinds wherewith to associate. There will likely be marsh-wrens and red-winged blackbirds for a time, and the noisy king-rail and sly least bittern and transient visitors from the uplands, but the sparrows will keep their distance unless a drought upsets all nature's plans and drives every creature that can travel so far to where there is yet some moisture. At such a time the swamp-sparrow is lost in a crowd and doubtless ill at ease. But we need not consider abnormal conditions. Our bird is at its best from April to November, and then those who are interested had better seek its acquaintance. Perhaps when the nest is finished—a simple structure placed upon the ground—and the eggs are laid the bird is more full of vim and music than before or later. At this time there are noticed a strength and volume of sound in the simple song that make the listener doubtful for the moment if the bird singing is really the swamp-sparrow. Later in the summer this ecstatic effort is less seldom heard, even when a late brood is raised,—

and sometimes I have found the nest with eggs after the first week in August ; and a month later these young birds are killed by the dozens when the slaughtering of reed-birds is the sportsman's popular pastime. Bluebirds, orioles, and king-birds also are all too apt to gather about the marshes and, of course, share the same fate.

It frequently happens, in autumn, when the migratory birds are beginning to move off and the hosts from the mountains come swooping down upon the plain, that the marshes and river-shore and every haunt of the bird we have been considering are invaded by a small, brown, mottled species that is everywhere known, when known at all, as the savanna sparrow. It never essays to more than a cheerful chirp, even when at home and happily married ; but now, here on the brown, frost-bitten meadows, they chirp with an impatience that borders on fault-finding, and so to the rambler are interesting only by reason of their numbers. I have seen hundreds of sparrows drifting like dead leaves along the fences of our upland fields, but here in the immediate river-valley it is sometimes a matter of thousands. A "wave of migration," as the bird-men call it, and correctly, but it is also a general disturbance of the regular order of affairs that must be distressing to the resident bird-world. If we have an early winter—a rare occurrence—these savanna sparrows do not stay long, but when autumnal conditions prevail until New Year's, we may find a few of them almost any day. Sooner or later they all disappear, and

make far briefer visits on their northward flight. It is with them as with all other migratory birds: they go as far south in autumn or north in spring as they find their needs require, and then are quite indifferent and irregular as to further progress. I have been much amused at a stock phrase regarding migrating birds in a recent "hand-book," that such and such species winter "from Virginia southward."



Savanna Sparrow.

Many of these birds winter habitually and in numbers in Southern New Jersey. Now, a part of Virginia is farther north than the southernmost point of New Jersey, so that the statement is rather indefinite; but, taking the coast-line, my point of observation is fully one hundred and fifty miles north of the nearest point in Virginia, and yet here, winter after winter,—

and it has always been so,—birds are found that are stated as being at this season much farther south. There is no real reason why these birds should not stay in Jersey. It is just as warm. There is practically the same flora, the food-supply is abundant, and every other feature is at hand to make the birds comfortable. There is nothing strange in the fact that the vesper-sparrow is always here, nor that the savanna sparrow lingers until after the holidays ; it is no more strange, indeed, than that sea-side birds should wander up the river-valley to the very limits of tide-water ; for instance, the sharp-tailed finch.

Let us turn now from December to April, from discussion to observation, and along some sunny wood-road all barred and cross-bared by the shadows of still leafless branches, listen for the industrious scratching of that beautiful finch or sparrow, the chewink, among the dead leaves. We have in this bird one of the most delightful phases of the many-sided sparrow-life. It is something so different, in fact, from the ways of the “chippy” or song-sparrow that the bird is called by most people the “swamp-robin,” and not one in a thousand knows that the bird is a finch and not allied in any way to the thrushes. The chewink is both resident and migratory, yet he is essentially a summer bird. It is when all that makes for greatest activity is at high-water mark that the chewink sings his loudest strains and chirps till the woods ring with his earnestness, and he flashes and flits through the lush green growths as if the cares

of the universe rested upon him. Best of all, the chewink's taste in matters of locality is always excellent. There must be water near. It detests our usual late summer drought, and quits the neighborhood at the earliest intimations of its coming; but given a cool, damp hollow in the woods, a fern-hidden cow-path through the thick-set sproutland, an upland swamp well grown with blueberries, or some rocky ledge from which trickles a little spring, and there will be no happier occupant of the place than the chewink. Happy, if a constant, self-



Chewink.

contented chirping of *chewink* is evidence thereof; and to this is added a sprightly song when the bird leaves the ground for a moment and whistles so that all may hear, *chēē-dō, dē dē dē—dē dē*. It is an early song with us, heard often when the shad-blossoms begin to show, and sometimes earlier, as when the first seekers of arbutus venture into the oak woods and hear it in some shady hollow where the snow perhaps still lingers. In May, when the chorus of returning summer is sung in the orchard, I hear an

answering song from the chewink hidden in the hill-side, and no less happy than the warblers because a dweller in waste places and neglected nooks and corners of the farm. "Swamp-robin," indeed, is no bad name, for swamps are not such desolate spots as the town-dweller is apt to imagine. To me a swamp means freedom. It means nature without man's interference ; and when we get as close as possible to the earth and as far as possible from mankind, we begin to breathe and one by one the scales drop from our eyes. To spend the day with a chewink is to spend it in good company and to have an excellent example in the matter of cheerfulness set before us.

It is possible, perhaps, to be unduly influenced and led to ascribe to birds virtues which they do not possess. In all things we have favorites : favorite flowers, books, houses, cities, and countries, so why not birds? There are scores of them to be met in any summer day's ramble, and they cannot or never do influence us alike. We may be indifferent to a swallow and grow enthusiastic over a thrush, but I have always held to the reverse. It is the unobtrusive, overlooked, and underrated birds that claim my closest regard. The crowd that will stand and listen to a rose-breast will be deaf to the chewink. While no less enthusiastic as to the grosbeak's wonderful song, I am always held by the familiar chirp that was a veritable charm and in some degree a wonder when I scarcely knew one bird from another. I never hear the bird but I

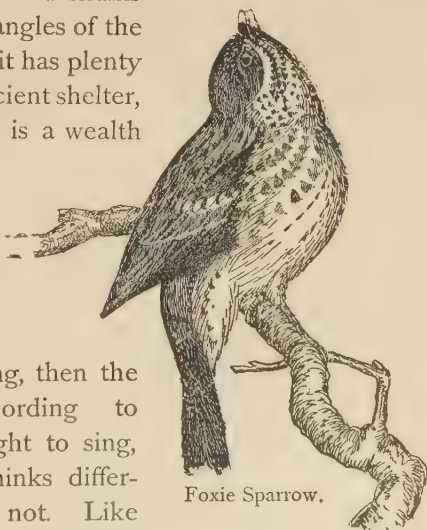
see again the old spring-house and the moss-edged flag-stones of the path that led to it. For years there were chewinks about the spot all summer. They were the delight of the old folks then, and alas! I am the old folks now. That double chirp, *che-wink*, that as a magician's wand bids time turn back, restores me to those to whom I owe existence, and rebuilds the play-ground of an infant,—that is a bird-note embodying all that I can realize in the one word, music. It may fall harsh upon the common ear, it may not chord with the melody of the thrush that is singing, it may click and clatter like the broken string or the cracked trumpet, but it recalls to me the long-dead past, it wipes away the tears of bitter days, and is all that I ask of the one word, music.

As summer progresses and at noontide the woods grow silent, it is cheering to the rambler to hear the chewink as it scratches away among the dead leaves and chatters constantly, like happy people whistling at their work. It is a good, wholesome sound, this double chirp, and to show that it means a great deal, draw too closely to the birds' nests and see how they can ring it in your ears. It is cruel to try to find the nests, however. A mere shallow depression in the ground and the eggs protectively colored, there is far more chance that you will tread upon the poor birds' treasures than detect their whereabouts with your eyes. It is inexplicable to me that this cruelty is so common among grown people. We cannot expect much of children, especially when we con-

sider the indifference and ignorance of parents ; but for grown men to persist in hunting for a bird's nest to gratify the whim of a thoughtless and heartless young woman is simply disgusting.

The overstaying chewink is not so interesting a bird. It seldom chirps and never sings,—that is, I never heard it,—and skulks in the densest tangles of the swamps. Here it has plenty of food and sufficient shelter, and when there is a wealth of winter sunshine, a grand outpouring of heat that makes the

rambler think at once of spring, then the chewink, according to man's views, ought to sing, but the bird thinks differently and does not. Like



Foxie Sparrow.

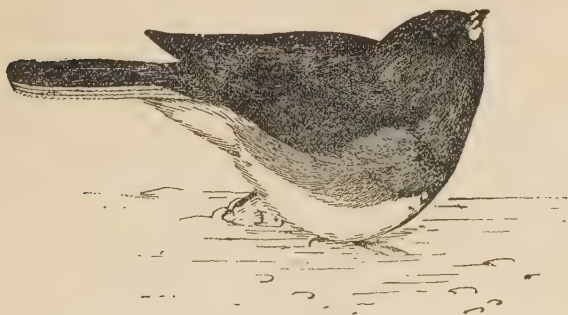
mankind, however, it loves to kick over the traces occasionally, and once, at least, I was treated to a veritable surprise. Not long since, as I passed along an upland brook, I found the green-brier trembling with merry birds that threaded its mazy tangles. Besides tree-sparrows and snow-birds, there were many fox-colored and white-throated sparrows and several chewinks, and the last, as if moved by the noisy host about them, chirped with

startling emphasis. They seemed anxious to proclaim their presence. They also seemed out of place, and this means out of tune. I expected to find all the others, and their united twitterings was excellent winter morning music. And a word here concerning the most prominent of all the birds I saw at the time, the big red-brown sparrows that have been duly named fox-colored, but nicknamed by me, years ago, "foxies," and so I shall always call them. They do not venture into town nor frequent the suburbs, except very transiently. They come and go in the night, perhaps, for I see them in abundance one day, and then all are gone for the season; at least, this has frequently been my autumn experience. But there are certain old worm-fences with a barrier of weeds and greenbrier and grape-vine in which "foxies" take up their abode, sometimes in autumn and always on the approach of spring, at which later date they often sing superbly.

I doubt if finer bird-music is ever heard than the occasional outbursts of ecstasy from a hundred or more of these sparrows gathered closely together in the thicket. It is during pleasant February days usually, but sometimes in March, if the season is late, and even in April, that these birds may be heard; but in the first-named month I have met them in greatest numbers. The first frogs of the season having peeped their shrill call and sounded their rattling cry, we naturally look about us for all sorts of signs of spring, and fancy warmer

weather is near at hand, though we may have to wait six weeks for it. Such days are not sure to come, but they generally do, and we are always led astray by them; and the foxie sparrows in the greenbriers largely help us to our silly day-dreams of the coming season. It is delightful fiction, nevertheless, and we thank the jolly crew of the greenbriers for their sham prophecy that spring is near at hand.

Nearly half a century ago I remember looking out



Snow-bird.

of the window and seeing the yard covered with snow. The sun was shining at the time, and over the glittering surface of yard, fences, and the low box-bushes of the garden walk there were scores of snow-birds that at times scattered the dry flakes in high glee and to my infinite delight. I was allowed to toss handfuls of crumbs out of the window, and then waited to see the birds come close to the house and eat what I had thrown to them. It was my

first lesson in ornithology. I have long since learned that this little sparrow, in spite of its name, is not a *snow*-bird in a literal sense. It comes to us early in October and is here, off and on, until the grass begins to get green again, and sometimes later. I say "off and on," for this trite expression best describes the bird's movements about my present home. They certainly follow the whim of the moment and are not influenced by the weather, except mechanically, for a violent wind sweeping across the fields will drive them to the protected thickets in the meadows, and sometimes I have failed to find them even there. But this is true of nearly all our small birds. They have the good taste to detest a windy day. Snow-birds are likely to be abundant with the mercury below zero ; again, when it is summer-hot, as were some days in December, 1895, they may be here by the hundreds ; and then in a whole week or more of moderate weather, of pleasant sunshine, and of gentle breezes not one is to be seen. These erratic movements cannot be explained by the question of food-supply. The conditions in this respect are fixed in winter, and birds in February appear to find quite as much to eat as they did on their first appearance in the early autumn. There seems to be no one set of conditions or character of surroundings that is peculiarly attractive, beyond the fact that they prefer the open country. I find them often on the edge of the woods, but seldom far down their leafy depths. I have always looked upon them as birds of the fields and garden, and yet

bushes are never too near the house for them to roost therein. During the day they are fence-birds, one might say, for when pursued by boys or hawks they dart in and out among rails, boards, and paling in a way to bewilder the pursuer ; and they can run—hop, really—over the ground with wonderful speed, and look like mice at such a time ; but you are lucky to catch even a glimpse of them if there is any sheltering growth of grass or weeds. When they favor me with their presence, they usually gather at sundown, or earlier if the day be dark, about the cedars and the huge box-bushes near my door, and roost there. Just before retiring there is often heard a pleasant twittering that might perhaps be called a concert. It is free from the metallic harshness of many birds and a source of delight to the rambling bird-lover, something sure to be remembered when the events of the day are recalled. But this is not all the music of the little snow-birds. They can and do sing otherwise and quite well. Even in winter this more elaborate effort is sometimes heard, but it has nothing to do with the approach of a snow-storm. That pretty fancy proves to be nothing but a whim in the search-light of statistics. In fact, I have known winters without snow, but never has that season come and gone without snow-birds, and merry, singing snow-birds, too.

Are there fewer of these birds than formerly? This is a good deal like asking if the climate is changing, and our replies are likely to be about as satisfactory. As to the weather, comparing half-

century with half-century, there *does* appear to be less snow than in the days of our grandfathers, and my observations give me the impression that there are fewer snow-birds. I have kept no record—if, indeed, a satisfactory one could have been kept—as to these birds, but as I recall them, when a boy, and compare these recollections with present observations, they are seen less frequently now. They are more uncertain : here to-day and gone to-morrow ; while I think of them years ago as a pretty constant feature of the winter. It has not availed me much to seek the impressions of those who have always lived about here. Their ideas are always very vague, save in the opinion that “snow-birds are chippies turned black,” as one of these old people expressed it. Except in the movements of game-birds and wild fowl, there is no well-defined impression current as to bird-migration, and some appear to think that song-birds are merely silent, not absent. This absurdity is not so very remarkable, after all, for we must remember that northern birds replace southern ones in autumn, and many of the latter, as “overstayers,” remain throughout the winter. But as regards the numbers of snow-birds, may not the matter be explained by the fact that these blue-black sparrows really like the snow, and of course, by reason of their dark color, are very conspicuous? Other sparrows do not care to sport in it to the same extent, and seek the shelter of greenbrier thickets. If, then, we had more snows years ago, and, consequently, the snow-birds

more persistently before us, the impression would follow of their actual greater abundance, whereas, in fact, they are as numerous now, but, hidden among shrubbery and weeds, although leafless, they are not so conspicuous. And, too, at such times they associate freely with tree-sparrows and white-throats, and therefore are not so generally noticed, except by the field naturalist on business bent. Whatever the precise state of the case relatively, in fact, they have not become scarce, but remain still a feature of the winter landscape. They do not, I regret to say, congregate about our door-steps as I would like, but it remains with us to effect an improvement in this respect. We should scatter crumbs and seed when there is snow upon the ground, and keep the cats away. I have made them very tame after a deep snow, but they never become reckless. No snare that I ever—as a boy—set up was effective in capturing them, except very rarely. The late Mr. Lockwood has described their diving into snow-banks to reach food that had been covered. This pretty sight I have seldom witnessed ; but when they cluster among tall weeds that stand well above the snow, and cling to them as they bend beneath their weight, cheerily chirping the while, we have a delightful winter-day exhibition worth walking far to witness. One word more. An excellent observer maintains that I am wrong. He insists that there occurs, in accordance with the weather, a “wave,” as he calls it, of snow-birds from the mountains to the meadows and back again, as the storms and clearing weather alternately prevail.

In other words, that the snow-birds are blown to and fro like dead leaves as the winds happen to blow up or down the river-valley. Perhaps so, but I do not believe it.

As much unlike the blue-black snow-bird in appearance as in disposition is the white-throated sparrow, or Peabody-bird. These come to us from the north at about the same time, but do not show themselves as freely. They cling to the thickets like the yellow leaves of the young beeches, and you have to look for them even when there are many about. Their fancy is for the out-of-the-way places that are not easily penetrated, and particularly green-brier thickets that defy exploration. It is a marvel that they can find their way unscratched through some of their ordinary winter haunts. Of course they recognize no law in such matters, and at times a great host of them will come boldly into the open and perch upon fence-posts and go through the full programme of what we call our sociable sparrows. They will even sing at such times, and so gladden the quiet and deserted upland fields. Though attractive then and a source of pleasure to the contemplative Rambler, I like them better amid their more natural surroundings on the sheltered south hill-slope, enjoying the winter sunshine and singing in their sleepy, monotonous way. Is there a time when they are "out of song"? From October to April I have them near at hand, and need not see them to speak positively of their presence. Their song cannot be mistaken for that of any other bird, and so

often does it happen that they sing when other birds are silent, that they become by reason of this a great addition to our woods and by-ways in winter. It would be indeed a depressing change from the tuneful summer if we had no midwinter minstrelsy, and this the Peabody - birds abundantly provide.

I have said that I have Peabody - birds always near by, but the winter of 1894-95 was an exception. They came, but did not stay, and made but a brief sojourn on their northward journey in April. I can offer no explanation of this.



Peabody-bird.

My eyes could detect no change in the conditions of their old-time haunts, and but a few miles away they were as common as usual. At this time—a year later—they are abundant, and celebrated New Year's, in spite of the cold, by singing with great ardor, and

the next day—a brisk, bright winter morning—their voices almost drowned the scolding of a crow that I had unwittingly disturbed.

The pine-finch is a little sparrow that, if it went about alone or but two or three together, would be quite overlooked; indeed, when there are a great many of them they will conduct themselves in such a way as not to be at all conspicuous; and if ever there was an uncertain sparrow, this is the one. So far as my experience goes, they are not to be looked for. If you find them, well; but it is useless to go



Pine-finch.

about gazing at the tree-tops until your neck aches, with the expectation that sooner or later you will find

brown finches a host of dusty, yellow-clinging to the topmost twigs of tall trees, and then, taking flight, dotting the blue sky until out of sight. They have always appeared to me to drop from the clouds and then to seek this airy altitude again. Of course, you are likely to see these birds at any time from October to April, or earlier and later, but do not expect it. Take so much of their presence as comes in your way and be thankful, for they are cheerful birds that make you wonder why people generally have such a horror of winter days in the country, as if leaves, green grass, and flowers were essential to make the out-door world even tolerable. It is quite

different in New England. Mr. Cram writes to me from New Hampshire that "since October [1895] pine-finches have been abundant everywhere. No matter in what direction I happen to walk, I see hundreds of them crawling over the evergreens and never taking the slightest notice of any one. Just before they fly they utter a peculiar screaming note, and then, rising into the air, go whirling off in a dense flock to other feeding-grounds. They are usually accompanied by goldfinches." I have not found them so tame and near at hand ordinarily, but then I have few evergreens here to tempt them, and the tall deciduous trees have, I suppose, little or no attraction about their lower branches. After a heavy snow-fall all this is changed, and then I have seen them close to the ground and about fences, tame as Mr. Cram has described ; but my note-books mention very few such incidents. The notes of the pine-finch are not harsh, not a "peculiar screaming," as they have been described, but wholly pleasant to the ear. Can it be that our milder climate has drawn the harshness out ; given us in this lively bird a honey-bee without its sting ? Whether or not, its lisping song reminds me of the summer thistle-finch, its near cousin, that delights in the fierce sunshine of an August afternoon, and seeks the company of crickets in the hot harvest-fields or swings with the bending thistle-stalk from which it gets its food. A January pine-finch is the best of all reminders of June sparrows and hot-weather birds that would have all the world one tropical zone if they could.

The Arctic circle, of which we hear much and know little, occasionally slips out of place and gets a few degrees nearer the equator than is at all necessary. This would be intolerable were it not that Arctic birds come down with it, and snow-buntings, a long-spur, cross-bills, and a pine-grosbeak ; yes, and the snowy owl and one other, still rarer, have been seen poking about the woods and over the fields of Southern New Jersey. When this circle-slipping is sudden and makes a great noise, like the blizzard of 1888, the ornithologists turn out in force and we know all the particulars, but there is a general indifference to little slips, and the "stragglers," as they are contemptuously called by the museum folk, are supposed to be too few to consider ; but a single pine-grosbeak or half a dozen red-polls are really better than a thousand, for it is, or they are, a great deal more easy to observe as respects habits, voice, and other particulars, just as one individual among men may be very entertaining by himself, but lost in a crowd. First let me say that a great many more northern birds come south than the bird-books state ; and, second, several come as far south as New Jersey that are supposed to be confined to New England at this time of year. This has been disputed, but simply on the ground of its being at variance with some preconceptions concerning migration. It is not worthy of special notice, but this much may be said in passing. Many northern birds come ashore on our New Jersey coast and scatter inland before finally leaving us.

Long years of constant association with a taxidermist, who was supplied with birds from the "pine regions," brought to him by the charcoal-burners, gave me opportunities far superior to field work to see what



Snow-bunting and Lapland Long-spur.

birds were about in winter ; and it is a curious fact that this taxidermist received birds in the flesh from near the coast that were not, that same winter, observed by any one in the immediate valley of the Delaware, and snow-buntings, several long-spurs,

snowy owls, pine-grosbeaks, and a Bohemian chatteringer were among them.

Observations by others as well as my own go to show that it is not a question of cold as to whether we are likely to have this or that arctic bird with us, but wholly a matter of snow. Deep and long-lasting snows will attract and hold them, too ; or is it that their long journey has fatigued them to an extent precluding prompt return ? About my own neighborhood, year in and year out, we are almost sure, I think, to have a few common cross-bills, and occasionally the white-winged species ; then snow-buntings, and lastly straggling pine-grosbeaks. The Lapland long-spur is an "accidental" visitor, whatever that may mean. Certainly there is no accidental feature in their coming. Associated with snow-buntings, they follow their leaders, and if they come, the long-spur comes also. This is true of the bird in New Hampshire. Mr. Cram has only occasionally seen it, and always in the snow-bunting's company. I have seldom seen snow-buntings to good advantage, which is not surprising considering how comparatively few winters in each century they favor us with their abundant presence ; but once they victimized me by their rough-and-tumble manner. I was standing near a little clump of trees in the corner of a large open field. The snow was very deep, and I was watching with some interest the dead leaves as the wind carried them along, tumbling and bumping over the thin crust that had formed during the night. I was not a little surprised, a few

minutes later, to see these same dead leaves come back in the same fashion, and I realized that dead leaves did not fly against the wind. I had before me, without knowing it, a large flock of snow-buntings.

It is always a pleasant incident to meet with a



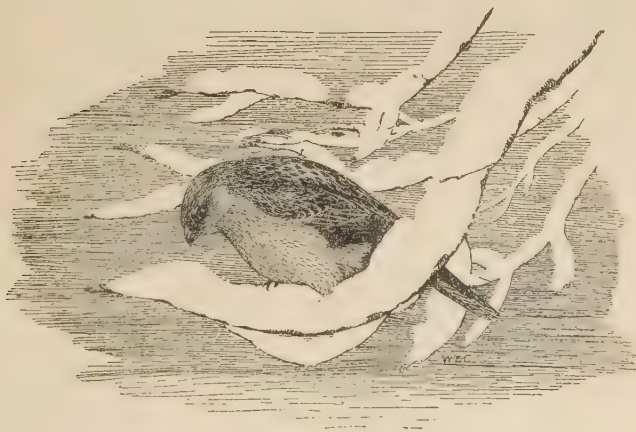
Cross-bills.

cross-bill. The bird will not prove remarkable in any way, except that its motions are a little parrot-like, which is not saying a word for gracefulness, as parrots are more like monstrosities than birds, nor will its chirp, twittering, or song, if one can call it such, be at all inspiring; and yet, because of the

novelty, I suppose, one is disposed to watch the bird as long as it remains in sight. Where these birds habitually range they move about in large companies ; but those that come down into Jersey from the coniferous forests of Pennsylvania are scattered individuals that have separated themselves from the main body of their kind and are here associated with birds of very different habits and appearance. They are veritable strangers here ; and when, as I know has happened, they are detected by mere accident associated with tree-sparrows and purple finches, and not in evergreens, but in leafless bushes, they present the appearance of creatures out of place and ill at ease, like bashful children away from home. Cross bills under such circumstances become mere curiosities ; but mankind has not yet lost its taste for things out of the ordinary.

During the winter of 1856-57, which was a moderately severe one, the cross-bills were phenomenally abundant in this neighborhood and came boldly into the town. They climbed about the sides of houses, where there were vines or ivy, and even went so far as to tap at the windows, as if demanding admission or asking for food. Both species were noticed, but the "white-wings were as one to a hundred," as an observer noted at the time. Since then there has been no such abundance of these birds. They demand evergreen forests, and just in proportion as these are lacking the birds forsake the locality. I have positive knowledge that the cross-bills and

many another northern bird were much more abundant in this vicinity a century ago than now. When all Southern New Jersey was one great pine forest, and there were areas of woodland connecting this region with the heavily forested regions of the upper Delaware Valley, there was a regular southward extension of all the northern birds that migrated in winter. This migratory movement, that is now



Pine-grosbeak.

limited to New England and the highland areas of the Alleghany region, then included what is now a practically treeless region. These so-called "stragglers" are the descendants of birds that a hundred or more years ago habitually visited the locality ; so it is not strange that these birds should come occasionally, and, as has been said before, they come more frequently than is generally believed.

Red and white may or may not be a pleasing combination, but when you see a pine-grosbeak on a snow-covered branch you will be pretty sure to take a second look, and the principal reason for this will be the rarity of your opportunities to do so. Grosbeaks do not like this region. They often come to Pennsylvania, but keep well within the hemlock forests, and it is only once in a while that they cross the Delaware and take an outing in a Jersey woodland. More frequently they wander from Long Island to our sea-coast, for these birds have been seen at Holly Beach and not noticed either north or west of that point during the same winter. But when the novelty of the bird's presence wears away, as it soon will, for it is stupid and silent, you will realize that something more than red, and a very dingy red at that, is required to make a bird attractive. There is everything in manner, and it is for this reason that a cat-bird or a wren is worth to the lover of out of doors all the grosbeaks that ever came from Canada. You look at them and then they are forgotten, but who could forget a Carolina wren?

There is not a day in the year that we may not see sparrows of one, two, or perhaps a dozen kinds. There is not a field, wood, or pasture that is not frequented by them. No spot so cold, so hot, so dry, or so wet but some one of the many species will find there a congenial home. There is a fixedness of purpose about them that enables you to anticipate their presence to some degree, and you are never likely to be wholly disappointed. If it is not one

species it will be another. You might as well try to cut the hours from a day as to take the sparrows from the morning. These birds are just sufficiently methodical to be comprehensible, but have nothing of the mechanical about them, as one might suppose from all ancient and some modern ornithological literature. Sparrows, as a class, are dear, delightful birds that make you contented even if you see nothing but themselves; for whether it be a song-sparrow or a cardinal, a rose-breasted grosbeak or a homely little "chippy," it has made your ramble worth all the exertion. If not, I have nothing more to say.

"But there are many more sparrows about here than have been mentioned; what of them?" I hear some one remark.

True, and there are many books to tell you all about them.



CHAPTER II.

WAITING FOR WARBLERS.

THERE are days in every year that are all too short and others that are immeasurably drawn out. Of the latter class is the April day when we take our initial outing for a set purpose and spend long hours waiting for warblers. All through the previous night the moon had made plain the familiar migratory route, and the last trace of the March winds had been smothered by the sweets of swelling blossoms. Early violets and the lilacs are now ready to welcome the expected guests, and surely they must be near at hand ; but somehow they do not come. Never, it may be, were the thickets in such fine disorder, and the April sunshine has warmed the dead grasses of last year until the air above them quivers ; but not even the flirt-tails, those speckled, red-polled warblers that always get here ahead of their cousins, will come. We wait all day for nothing, and go home both tired and discouraged ; but we were ahead of time, and not the birds. Tomorrow was the appointed time, but we never learn

this fact until to-morrow comes. Yesterday there were no warblers, and now the thickets are full of them. To use the popular word of the bird-men, the first "wave" has arrived, though the appearance of a thousand warblers that pass by with little fuss, though many feathers, is in no respect wave-like. What has been said about it is nothing to the purpose; it is enough to know that the warblers are on the way, and that for two weeks or more we shall be waiting.

If it were only a matter of waiting to see a wee bird go by, there would be no necessity for calling attention to the fact; but the aggravations of April are soon forgotten, and May-day—our only date that is magical and not commonplace—comes at last; and then what of the warblers? As the sands of the sea-shore, as the leaves of the forest, in number, and active as the motes in a sunbeam, they are the masters of the situation while they tarry. They are the fitting associates of the dainty spring blossoms, and some are as gayly colored. I have seen them flashing like fire as they clung to the snowy trunks of white birches; others, blue as bits of the sky above them, rested for an instant among blossoms blue as themselves, and then were lost to sight until they rose from their fragrant bed and chirped to the flowers and to me a cheery "good-by." I have seen them bathing in the glistening waters held aloft in the hollows of great lotus-leaves, and at times have grown almost weary watching them as they clung like leaves to the outer twigs of the old

elms, or explored the mazes of the underbrush, or played at bopeep in the shrubbery of our little door-yards. And seldom are they silent. There may be nothing uttered worthy of being called a song, yet not the simplest twitter but has an earnestness, an assurance of great happiness, that should find an echo in our hearts. Hide, as I have often done, in some thick-set bushes, and let the warblers come very near you. Let the black-throated blue, or the spotted, or the chestnut-sided, or any one of the well-nigh endless series flit by, perchance stop an instant and look you straight in the eyes, and then salute you with a simple *tsit-tsit-tsit*. See these passing warblers in some such simple way, see in them one of the chiefest of merits of this magical May-day, and you have gathered something of the bird-life about you that will always be remembered with delight. Perhaps, more than all birds and buds and blossoms combined, they make up the charm of this beautiful May-day; certainly, by their numbers alone, they exert an influence readily recognized but not so easily analyzed. Warblers open the season, announce the beginning of the long melodrama of summer, and nowhere else in this wide world is mankind blessed with more lovable heralds bringing good tidings to one and all.

Happily not all the warblers pass us by. Even in the most artificial and therefore forbidding gardens there are one or more kinds that we are quite sure to see. A yellow summer warbler or an orange and

black redstart will even put up with some gaudy exotic vine on a trellis ; but just now we need not concern ourselves about unfortunate people or waste our time in pitying birds. Let us go to some sunny slope where there are oaks that the squirrels planted, or to some remnant of a woodland tract with only native weeds dotting the leaf-mould, and here we will find an excellent example of these wandering wood-warblers, one with manners as pronounced as the black and white of its plumage. It runs about the trees with all the ease of a squirrel, and can hang on to the slenderest twigs, head down, back down, upside down, or down side up, with all the agility of an acrobat ; and though it may be hungry at the time and food abundant, it finds moments wherein to lisp its trisyllabic expression of content. In this sense it is a great singer, and not a silent bird, from the beginning of May until September ; and, further (what I have not seen stated in any book), when it has a nest, there is frequently a considerable variation in the ordinary *tsee-tsee-tsee*, these notes being varied in expression to almost clear, flute-like music, with a suspicion of a trill succeeding them.

This black-and-white tree-creeping warbler builds a cup-shaped nest on the ground ; but, while it chooses a comparatively safe place, the bird, by its over-anxiety, frequently points out the precise spot to any one who happens to come very near. Here is a bit of stupidity, not by any means confined to this bird, which before now ought to have been

outgrown. Just here evolution has proved a trifle weak in its workings.

This is one of our summer resident warblers that we may confidently expect to see, but there seems to be a good deal of variance in the opinions of bird-men as to its coming and going. It is stated to be extremely sensitive to cold, and the opposite opinion has also been expressed. This sensitiveness, if a fact, does not actually drive the bird away. I have



Black-and-White Tree-creeping Warbler.

seen them here in advance of the red-pollled warblers, and they linger habitually until late in November. Doubtless much more depends upon the food-supply than upon the temperature, for I have seen one of these birds that was evidently quite happy after an April snow-storm that whitened the ground and gave a decided wintry aspect to the woods, in spite of the blossoms and bursting leaf-buds.

A very different bird is the yellow-rumped warbler.



Yellow-rumped Warbler.

In it we have nearly, if not quite, the typical form of this group of birds, and a very merry fellow and excellent company it proves to be. I always regret to see the last of them pass by, and wonder why they will not rest in a region that they find sufficient unto their needs for nine months of the year. Yellow-rumped warblers are in place wherever you find them, and are as much at ease in the depths of the forest as about our garden fences. I have often seen them on the shade-trees of city streets, but particularly tame country is not their preference, and I have always observed them at their best among the willows along the river-shore. It is a favorite gathering-ground with them, and any estimate of their numbers is out of the question. Except in the case of certain strictly gregarious species, like the red-winged blackbirds, I have never seen so many birds of one kind together as of these lively little warblers among the willows on the bank of the river. Doubtless, like all small birds, they are always hungry and always feeding, but I could never detect them in the act of taking food. There was no fly-catching chase or darting into mid-air for some passing insect. They were always on the move, and so ceaseless was their chirping—a single metallic note—that the hum of their united voices resembled the continuous vibration of a telegraph wire. At times, though the river is wide, these birds would leave the willows and spend some time upon the opposite shore, where there were many evergreens, but they always returned, and evidently preferred

the more open willows to the thick-set cedars and gloomy spruces, even when it was a matter of shelter for the night. Occasionally the whole flock, as I may call it, would leave the trees and alight on the rubbish near the ground. Evidently there was an abundance of food here, for the dead grass, twigs, and bits of rotten wood left by the freshets were alive with insects ; but, if food was their object, the warblers indulged in a very quick lunch, for they never remained long enough to gather more than two or three spiders or beetles. Then, as if in answer to some signal, they would again throng the willows, chirp with greater animation, and move to some new point up or down stream, as fancy led them.

An occurrence—not infrequent—which seems to change the plans of not only this but all the migrating warblers is a violent northeast storm during the first week of May,—the Quakers’ “Yearly Meeting” storm, and the farmers’ “blossom” storm. I have known a rain of three days’ duration to seriously disable hundreds of birds : to chill them until they were unable to keep out of the cat’s clutches and very nearly fell into mine. Every plan of the birds is upset, apparently. Food and warmth at any price being their single aim in life, many come, at such a time, into our cities, while others stay close about the barns and stables of the farms. There is sometimes considerable mortality resulting from such distressing conditions, but the warm days sure to follow smooth their way, and the delayed birds are

soon off to their more northern nesting-grounds. Would a storm or a series of them that delayed their progress for almost a month result in their nesting in more southern localities? Has this ever happened?

As regards many of the migrating warblers, it does not seem to matter a great deal whether you are up



Chestnut-sided Warbler.

hill or down dale when looking for them. They are as likely to be in one place as another. Of course they have preferences, but these concern them only when they are settled for the summer, and not when on the move. I have seen these handsome chestnut-sided warblers on the fences of our most unattractive fields and busy as bees in the rank growths of the

mucky meadow. It is a tree-warbler, but occasionally condescends to keep company with Maryland yellow-throats, and may dart out from under a skunk cabbage when you are looking for it in the upper branches of the sapling birches. It is seldom quiet, unless asleep. Occasionally some of our warblers will stop for a moment and even go so far as to plume themselves, but the chestnut-sided warbler, like the redstart, plumes itself on the fact that it does not need to rest. It is always on the lookout, always moving from point to point, as if animated by an abiding faith that there is merit in motion, even should nothing come of it. That the peculiar manners of each warbler have been too elaborately commented upon is more than probable. Could we bleach or blacken the feathers of a dozen or more species and then turn them loose, I imagine there would be endless difficulties in the way of specific recognition. The flirt of the tail, the spread of the wings, and sometimes even the voice, would be clouded in uncertainty. As a class, they can be recognized. There is a family likeness running all through, though obscured in an oven-bird or a yellow-breasted chat ; but if the sun shines in your eyes do not be too sure of the species when the bird is near the top of a tall tree, and, I may add, never shoot it, to be certain ; this is absolutely unjustifiable under any circumstances. Your ignorance will do you no harm for the day, and the next time you are waiting for warblers you may be more lucky. The sun does not always shine in our eyes. Nor is it well to be too positive when the

“song” is heard, for those that are said to merely chirp or twitter sometimes repeat their single note so rapidly that it becomes song-like. An excited warbler is very suggestive of a person who stutters. There may be but one syllable uttered, but it is uttered with vigor, and sounds something like a whole



Black-throated Green Warblers.

sentence. There are exceptions, naturally, but one has good grounds for being positive when the black-throated green warblers are under observation. There is little chance, in such a case, of being misled. This pretty bird has a song,—is a “warbler” in the proper sense of that word ; and this moves me to say that the group as a whole are not happily

named, many having no trace of music in their throats, whatever may be concealed in their souls. Never does May come round but the black-throated green warblers come with it, and when they gather—perhaps a dozen or more—in the tall meadow hickories, from their leafy tops floats a melodious stream



Pine-creeping Warbler.

of clear, crisp notes that add a charm even to the meadows with their brilliant array of blossoms and attendant thrushes.

The unexpected, which may or may not be pleasant, is always likely to occur when we are watching for warblers. A hawk may dash through the trees and scatter every feather before us ; but it

is far more likely that no tragical incident will mar our pleasure, which will perhaps rather be increased by the sudden appearance of some new species of which we had not thought. The hooded, the parula, the worm-eating, the bay-breasted, the spotted, or the pine warbler may turn the corner of some twisted twig and command attention. There may be nothing very different in their ways, but the plumage is so marked and the display of contrasting colors so decided that it is a positive delight to trace their progress through the bushes or the tree-tops,—wherever, in fact, they may chance to be ; that is, if you are disposed to be entertained by ways rather than words, for, with very few exceptions, the most pretentious songs of these wood-warblers, over which writers have enthused and which they have minutely described, really amount to very little ; and particularly now, in early May, are of even less moment from the fact that acknowledged great musicians, skilled in all the art of melodious expression, cause the very air to tremble with their ecstatic singing.

There is always danger of overestimation of a wild bird's merits. Birds, to be sure, as a class cannot be overvalued ; they are really superior to anything that can be said in their favor ; but when we happen, by force of circumstances, to be particularly impressed by a song, or see unexpected intelligence in some display of cunning, we are apt to use our bright colors too freely in subsequently painting the bird's portrait. There come to us every

spring, and remain with us until autumn, two very thrush-like-looking warblers that most people would in no way associate with the pretty pied and spotted creatures that for a few days flit and flutter among the trees. Their anatomy tells of their origin and consanguinities near and remote, but to practical folk they are not warblers like a redstart or a summer yellow bird ; yet to all of us they are superb



Oven-bird.

musicians. One of these pretty warblers is the oven-bird, so called from the manner of its nesting ; the other is the water-thrush. Both are intelligibly named, and the latter is not so excessively rare in this locality as has been asserted. The oven-bird, in a soft brown suit with greenish lustre, its monotony relieved by streaks and spots of black, is much of the time a strictly woodland bird, although I have known of marked exceptions. It is a small

bird, but with such peculiar habits that it is prominent even when many birds of other kinds are about it. Attention will be drawn to it by its stately walk and a seesaw motion that suggests our long-legged wading birds. On their arrival, late in April, no bird is more familiar, and they even tarry for a few days in the larger yards of our towns if they have much shrubbery in them. But when the days grow some half-hour longer and the noontide heat a few degrees stronger, these thrush-like warblers take to the woods and settle there for the remainder of their summer sojourn ; here only can you see these lively birds at their best, and perhaps it is safe to say that to hear their song you must go to their haunts towards sunset or when the day is cloudy and rain threatened. I have not found them an all-day-long singer, even in nesting-time, though others, it appears, have been more fortunate. Before a favorite bit of woodland was cleared I have had nesting oven-birds at my elbow all day, and they have never more than chirped. Busy along the brook-side, these miniature sand-pipers were satisfied to chirp only, and this not frequently. It did not appear that my constant presence disturbed them in any way, and I concluded that they could be, if they chose, the most taciturn of all our birds. But as the sun went down all this changed, and when a mellow light that is beyond description filled the woodland, and other birds were thinking of their night-long rest, the oven-bird was moved to sing, and spent all his energy in uttering, with regularly

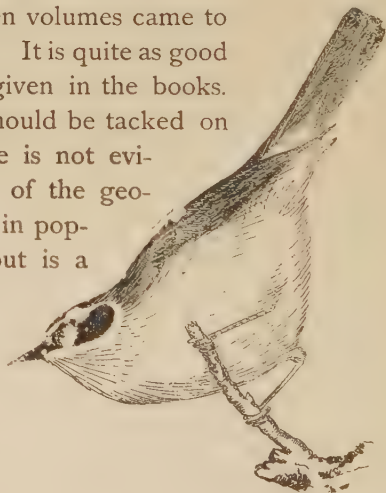
increasing emphasis, syllables that I have always likened to *see-saw* four or five times repeated. There is a clear, fife-like tone in the song that enables you to hear it when the bird is a long way off, and much is gained, too, by its being a song in the woods. The surrounding trees and dense foliage seem to rid it of a certain harshness that would be very noticeable if heard in an open field.

Comparatively few people, I suppose, have heard that other occasional sunset song of the oven-bird, when the fife is laid aside for the flute and the earnestness of the ordinary song gives place to a frenzied utterance that it is in vain to attempt to analyze. It may be thought the acme of non-appreciation, but this occasional burst of song is too much in the nature of a sudden impulse—is too rapid, intricate, and loud—to affect me as do the softer tones of a more calm and contemplative songster. One detects, it is true, here and there a note of matchless sweetness, but as a whole the exaggeration of sound and the bird's excessive action are to me far more curious than musical, and when it ceases, the “good-night” of a wood-pewee or the dreamy warble of a yellow-throat is far more acceptable to my ears. *De gustibus* holds good of the songs of birds as of other matters in this world, and I cannot share in the enthusiasm spread over pages of our ornithological literature; either this, or I have never heard the genuine songs described, but only a feeble imitation thereof. I do not accept this explanation of a friend. Delightful as is bird-music and much as it is to me,

I am convinced that it is something more than the mere utterance of the bird that holds us. The truth is that almost no song of a bird will stand the test of a scientific examination based upon the laws of music or of melody. The circumstances and surroundings quite as much as the sound uttered have to do with the pleasure of him who hears it. It is a delight, and one that no words can adequately describe, to wander through dense hemlock forests, such as were once common in the upper Delaware Valley, and there see flash in front of you a brightly colored bird, and hear it warbling as it goes. Though the "song" may be the most stridulous *tsit-tsit-tsit*, it is, nevertheless, a welcome sound, a sweet if not musical one, because of its suggestiveness. It is, in this instance, evidence of a contented, busy life in these gloomy woods. We are so pleased to see the bird and to hear its best efforts to express happiness, lame as they are from an artistic point of view, that the creature seems beautiful more because of its gayety than of its brilliant plumage, and musical because of its light-heartedness. From the ever-green forests of the mountains, from the gloomiest swamps that ever defied the sunlight, we carry with us the impression of wonderful musicians that have made good their claim rather by their happy manner than by any actual accomplishment. I would not say one word in disparagement of warblers, but surely they are not the only captivating birds in the land, as more than one ornithologist has suggested.

An associate of the oven-bird in early spring, but

of very different habits the summer through, is the ever-abundant and ever-delightful Maryland yellow-throat. Many a long year ago, when my only teacher as regards the out-door world was an old farm-hand to whom I always applied for information and have found since was seldom led astray, I asked about this little bird, and he told me that it was the "black-cheeked wren," and for years, until Audubon's seven volumes came to hand, I called it such. It is quite as good a name as the one given in the books. Why "Maryland" should be tacked on to the popular name is not evident. Scarcely one of the geographical terms used in popular nomenclature but is a downright absurdity. To bring about their disuse would be a better occupation for the bird-men than the introduction of the jaw-breaking trinomial-



Maryland Yellow-throat.

isms with which they lumber the pages of their lists, catalogues, and hand-books. This warbler, then, with its black cheeks and yellow throat and Quaker-brown back, is a lover of the lowlands, of the edges of swamps, and of those remaining traces of Edenic gardens, the meadows. It demands, or at least asks for, the rank growths that heat and moisture bring

about, and is not happy without them. During a recent drought I fancied that one of them was singing, *moisture, moisture, moisture, wet!* It certainly sounded as much like that as certain other words that have been put into its beak. The fact is, it not only sings differently in different localities, but individuals differ, as I have often noticed, and this variation puzzled me until I saw the bird in the act of singing. Last summer, near my house, both a yellow-throat and a Carolina wren, often at the same time, kept asking for an hour or more, "*Where did you get it?*" It needed sharper ears than mine to distinguish between the birds. Indeed, I doubt if any one, guided by the sound alone, could have distinguished one from the other. My yellow-throats at home have a particular fancy for the foot of a long bluff from which issue many springs, and around which cluster great masses of skunk cabbage. About these unattractive plants and among the matted dead leaves and moss the birds hunt all the day long, varying this with frequent upward flights to the sprouting birches or spice-wood bushes, from which they sing with a clear-voiced animation that may be heard for a long distance. Here, too, amid what people count as desolating dampness, the yellow-throats build their nests, and the spot becomes the more dear to them from this fact, for later in the summer they do not wander away. It would not be a very difficult task to determine how many times in an hour, from sunrise to sunset, one of these birds shouts to the outside world, *wittitee, wittitee, wittitee, weé!* which, being

interpreted, signifies that with them all is well ; for yellow-throats are happy birds, and though pre-eminently active, are not fidgety or ill-tempered like wrens. Even if you go very near their nests they will not fret, unless you prove a brute, and then they would kill you if they could, and more's the pity that they have not the power. But the charm of these pretty birds consists in their summer-long merry-making. Unlike many birds that find nothing to sing about, nothing to celebrate after the nesting is over, the yellow-throats sing from the day of their coming to that of their departure. They do not admit that they are old because their offspring have grown up and left them, but keep on in the same even-tempered way, and find more to be thankful for than to fret about. In fact, I have not discovered that any conditions are quite disheartening. Excessive rain does not damp their spirits, nor a disastrous midsummer drought, unless it cuts short their food-supply. They stick closely to the spots they chose as nesting-sites weeks before, and when even the thrushes have given up their concerts and the rose-breast merely *clicks* as it passes through the woods, these birds still sing with unabated energy, *happily, happily, happy are we !*

It is always possible to say too much, but when we set out to chat of the redstart there is not much probability of serious exaggeration. It is, fortunately, not a rare bird, and is so artless in all its ways that it has not given rise to useless wrangling in the ornithological journals. Following the cue of anatomi-

Redstarts.



cal structure,—and this is the only proper guide,—birds are classed in a scientific or natural way that admits of no dispute ; but to the popular mind many a lower form of bird-life enjoys a prominence and a value, so to speak, not accorded to the true higher types. The redstart is a warbler, but it has always seemed to me to represent the highest type, the culmination of evolutionary effort, among birds, and that no other bird, taking everything into consideration, could excel it. What has surprised me more than all else is that this bird is not so well known as the bluebird or the robin. It is always and everywhere abundant, and really stays all summer and nests where it is recorded as merely a transient visitor. I chanced recently to see the statement that it is seldom found breeding in a given county in Pennsylvania, whereas I know that it is abundant there summer after summer, and as common among the trees of village streets as the red-eyed vireo. Years ago, perhaps, it was a forest bird, but time has changed all that. In the summer of 1895 there were three pairs that had nests within a few yards of my house, and one of them was built in a cedar directly in front of a rustic seat that was very frequently occupied. All the season through the birds were as tame as house-wrens or chipping-sparrows, and so it has been for years. There has been a deal of rubbish written about their haunts, shyness, and comparative rarity. Redstarts, if not strictly musical, are pleasantly cheerful, and their efforts at singing are not devoid of a certain measure of success. Again, the strongly con-

trasted colors of their plumage render them always conspicuous, whatever their surroundings ; and yet, strange to say, these birds are not generally known. Tell ninety-nine out of every one hundred people that it is a black canary from the cannibal islands, and they will not suspect that you are hoaxing them. But, on the other hand, there are a great many people who *do* know the lively redstarts, and not one of these fortunate folk but loves them. It would be hard to find in all our avi-fauna, or in that of any other country, a more attractive form of bird-life.

With the general northward rush of migratory birds,—thrushes, finches, flycatchers, and warblers,—the redstarts appear, though not so early as many others, for they must have insects, and cannot, as do many, flourish on a vegetable diet for a while. Like all little birds, redstarts are “ feathered appetites,” and eating from dawn to dark seems to be the sole end of their existence ; but finally other views of life crowd upon them, and eating, like the intricacies of their leafy surroundings, loses its novelty. The sobering thought and anxieties of nesting steady them for a few weeks, during which time they are less like the man who remarked, “ What with three meals a day, lunch, and a nap in the afternoon, I’ve no time for work.” I fancy they eat less when they are building a nest, for this structure, the result of joint labor, is not hurriedly put together, but neatly woven of soft materials, and is very durable. The storms of the following autumn and winter do not always scatter it to the winds.

To give the story of the redstart from May to October is to write the history of a summer, and I scarcely dare assume that task. Redstarts and azaleas, dog-wood, violets, and snowy wind-flowers ; young leaves as dainty as the choicest blossoms, green grass, and all the lush growths that cluster in the marsh ; fresh new earth unmarred as yet by chilling storm or wilting sunshine ; gentle, invigorating warmth and all that follow in its train ; spring-tide and music ; redstarts and all vernal beauty.

The sleepy sunshine of long summer afternoons, the dense shade beneath the thick and dusty leaves, the quiet of mid-day hours, the noiseless flow of the unresting tide, and with it all the agile, flashing, ever-flitting redstarts, their wiry notes as ceaseless as those of creaking crickets,—a summer song that neither angry storm nor savage heat can silence.



CHAPTER III.

THE MASTERS OF MELODY.

IT is humiliating to think that we have no tame wild birds, and yet we might have many. Thoreau proved this while living in his Walden hut, and it has been shown time and again that man, and not the birds, is at fault. They are driven off, and man is the driver. Now—and perhaps it has been so always—there are too many farmers who complain if a robin eats a cherry or the cat-birds raid the strawberry beds. These are the men who too often rule in the community, and between their greed and others' indifference the birds that would otherwise crowd about our door-yards are not only driven to the fields and orchard, but persecuted even there. What nature considerably gave to this country is rejected, and an alien bird, a veritable outcast of featherdom, has been received with open arms. A hundred English sparrows perch upon the ridge-pole and creep between the slats of the closed shutters, and lucky are we if, in winter, there is a single robin in the orchard. A score of these sparrows will stand guard where the

outlook is good and dispute the approach of every wren and bluebird. There is not a lilac hedge or an old box-bush in which the jolly "chippy" can now feel sure of freedom from molestation, and the song-sparrows that once asked for crumbs in midwinter at the kitchen door and paid for them in song now seldom venture over the garden fence. Not one of our common birds, not even the wren, is as tame as it might be and willingly would be, though many of the shy dwellers in deep woods and far-off swamps and unfrequented fields would come at least within hearing if they had assurance of safety. The vast majority of birds that are now associated in our minds with the remote forests, those farthest removed from man, do not prefer these regions to cultivated areas, but realize their greater immunity from danger in such localities. These birds do not flee from the single cabins of backwoodsmen, nor are they disturbed by the camp-fires of true sportsmen; but they dread the unthinking crowd that open new lands to civilization, and who apparently consider it a duty to persecute the earlier occupants. It may be necessary to kill the wolves and the wild-cats, but the slaughter should cease before bird-life is exterminated or driven away. It may be asked, How can the wild birds be again made tame? and the reply—a confident one—is ready. By not doing anything that we now do, and by doing a great deal that we leave undone. The great obstacle is ignorance; a scarcely minor one is greed; a lesser one, yet of much magnitude, is indifference. To overcome these is a

greater task than ever Hercules performed. Man seems to glory in certain forms of ignorance, and when you speak of the positive, unqualified usefulness of birds to many a farmer, he will toss his head and thunder forth, "You can't tell me anything about that." You cannot effectively tell him, I admit. He is a hopeless fool ; but why not have his children taught better before their minds are warped by their idiotic sire? Our school-teachers have the opportunity, but I doubt if it is ever made use of. It is missionary work that costs neither money nor lives, and is as dignified as any other phase of human activity. There are men who value a berry more than a singing thrush, and wear themselves out in chasing dimes,—horticultural small fry that never deal in dollars,—and these are the men who set snares for cat-birds in spite of the law of the State protecting them. Indeed, unless a man shoots a singing-bird on the highway or in the public park, he is never molested. Then, too, there are sportsmen who claim that the world outside of city limits is for their sole delectation, and demand the death of every hawk and owl because these birds occasionally dine on quail or grouse,—a rare occurrence ; such men are an unreasonable set that need checking, for they have already wrought endless mischief. Lastly, there are the mighty host of indifferent people, men otherwise intelligent, but so engrossed with personal affairs, so preoccupied with business, that the song of a bird never falls upon their ears ; and from them all the way down the scale of humanity

to that pitiful spectacle, a woman who wears a bird's skin on her hat, the culpable accessory of that vile creature, a bird-murderer.

The robin, because it is not methodically migratory, but comes and goes all winter and is here at other times, is perhaps the best known of all our birds. The name is so prominent in children's sto-



Robin.

ries, in folk-lore, in poetry, and in general literature, that even town children who have never seen the bird know it by name ; but to many grown people, even those who have lived all their lives in the country, the robin is not familiar as a winter bird. It is known to come and go, it is true, but is supposed to be merely in transit, and just where the observer happens to be is not its abiding-place. This impression is due to lack of observation, for the birds are as well disposed towards your thicket and cedar-trees

as those of some far-off neighbor. This crystal-clear, cold January day, with the mercury almost at zero, I found the robins on the south hill-side, and seldom have they shown to better advantage. One was perched in a sapling beech to which the leaves still clung. It chirped at times so that its companions could hear it, and was answered by them, as well as by the nuthatches, a tree-creeper, some sparrows, and a winter wren. It was a cozy, warm spot wherein these birds had gathered, which, strangely enough, was filled with music even when every bird was mute. This robin was half concealed among the crisp beech leaves, and these—not the birds about them—were singing. The breeze caused them to tremble violently, and their thin edges were as harp-strings, the wiry sound produced being smoothed by the crisp rattling caused by the leaves' rapid contact with each other. It was much like the click of butterflies' wings, but greatly exaggerated. A simple sound, but a sweet, wholesome one that made me think less of the winter's rigor and recalled the recent warm autumnal days. They were singing leaves, and the robin watched them closely as he stood near by, and chirped at times, as if to encourage them. Altogether it made a pretty picture, one of those that human skill has not yet transferred to a printed page; and our winter sunshine is full of just such beauty.

How incomprehensible it is that any one should speak of the *few* robins that venture to remain! Flocks of a hundred or more are not uncommon in the depth of winter, and this recalls the fact that

at this time of year robins are never alone. It may appear so for a time, but when the bird you are watching is ready to move on his call will be answered by others that you have not seen, and half a dozen at least will fly off to new scenes. This is often noticed on a much larger scale when we flush robins in a field. They are generally widely scattered, and, go where you will, there will be one or two hopping before you ; but when one takes alarm the danger-cry is heard by all, and a great flock will gather in the air in an incredibly short time. Robins are not lovers of frozen ground ; they know where the earth resists frost, down in the marshy meadows, and there they congregate in the dreary midwinter afternoons after spending the morning feeding upon berries. I have seen them picking those of the cedar, poison ivy, greenbrier, and even the seedy, withered fruit of the poke ; but at times this question of food-supply must be a difficult problem to solve, and then they leave us for a while until pleasanter weather prevails, when they venture back. During the last twenty years, however, the movements of the robins have been little influenced by the weather.

In April, when the chill of winter is no longer in its bones, the robin becomes prominent, and the more so because of the noise it makes. It sings fairly well, and early in the morning there is a world of suggestiveness in the ringing notes. The song is loud, declamatory, and acceptable more for the pleasant thoughts it occasions than for the actual melody.

We are always glad to hear the robins, but never for the same reason that we listen to a wood-thrush. Of course there are exceptions. The world is full of them. Occasionally a robin has an inspiration and sings like the musical thrushes to which it is related, but this seldom occurs. We accept its ordinary efforts because they are heard first when there is comparatively little bird-music, and also for the reason that every note is one of cheerfulness. If ever a bird proclaims "Begone, dull care !" it is the robin.

There is an inexhaustible fund of amusement and instruction in watching a pair of nesting robins ; not so much because at such times they are different from other birds, but by reason of their endless chattering and general earnestness, indicative of their remarkable vocabulary. All birds talk and some both talk and sing, as any careful observer well knows ; but, except in the case of the crows, this wide range of utterances is not so easily recognized among birds generally as it is among the robins. It is something very different from the familiar alarm-cry, the soothing of the nestlings, or the gentle chirp of mate to mate ; and, as with ourselves, a difference of opinion among them is the parent of volubility. An angry robin can scold, an importunate one can coax, a victorious one can exult ; and, while it is all robin language, nobody will be bold enough to assert that it is the same single sound or note differently expressed. It is really a wide range of expression, always the same under similar circumstances ; but never is the ejaculation of ill temper uttered when

an opposite emotion is felt. In this most interesting feature of bird-life there is yet much to be learned, and an excellent field is open to the enthusiastic out-door naturalist who happily may be blest also with the patience of Job.

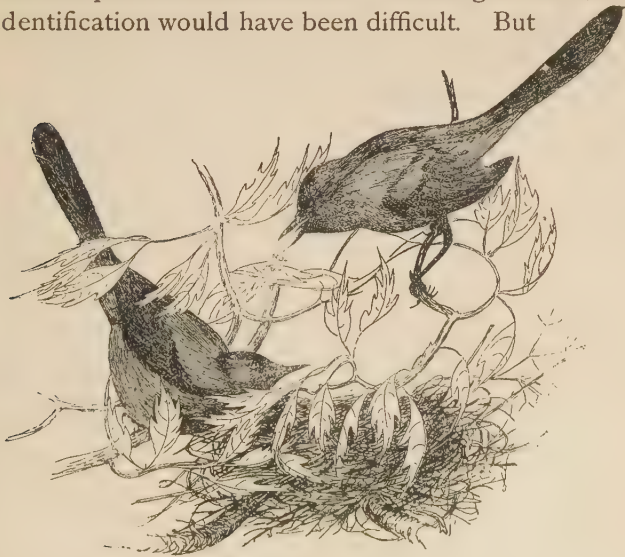
With the close of the nesting season—and this extends well into the summer—much of the attractiveness of this bird disappears. As individual members of great loose flocks that fret the upper air with an incessant chirping, they offer little to entertain us even when the less hardy minstrels of the summer have sought their southern homes. It is true that they add something to the picture of a dreamy October afternoon when the mellow sunlight tips the wilted grasses with dull gold. They restore for the time the summer-tide activity of the meadows when with golden-winged woodpeckers they chase the crickets in the close-cropped pastures, but they are soon forgotten if a song-sparrow sings or a wary hawk screams among the clouds. Robins are always welcome, but never more so than when they chatter, on an April morning, of the near future with its buds and blossoms.

To refer again to the taming of wild birds, probably the first to accept our invitation, if it felt that it was sincere, would be the much maligned cat-bird. As it is, this thrush has such a fancy for garden life and looks with such favor on the shrubbery near our houses, that, notwithstanding much persecution, it is willing to run endless risks that it may dwell within the shadow of our daily rounds ; nor does it appear to

be forever on the watch for our approach and quick to dart away at our appearance. We never have to look long or far to discover it. Indeed, it is so far trustful, strange to say, that it has a word of welcome ; and would we were always moved to accept it as such and return the attention. I speak without hesitation, for I have known of kindness being shown a cat-bird, and there was abundant evidence of its appreciation. We are apt to hear the bird spoken of as mischievous, but a better term is full of fun. The cat-bird has this quality in greater measure than, possibly, any other species.

It is not unusual for one or more of these birds to stay all winter in some secluded spot where green-brier berries and insects under dead leaves supply them with food. Occasionally a chewink and a cat-bird in friendly association will remain from autumn until spring about a low, swampy piece of ground which the water that wells to the surface keeps free from frost. It is interesting to meet with these birds when the ground is covered with snow and not even a green leaf is visible ; at such a time the proper winter birds, I fancy, look upon them with suspicion ; at least I so interpreted a great commotion one morning when a Carolina wren was haranguing the gathered company at the top of its voice, while at the same time tree-sparrows chattered, a jay screamed, and every bird of the meadows and hill-side collected in a fern clad nook that yet retained a trace of summer's freshness. All that I could discover of an unusual character was a chewink and a cat-bird that

had sought refuge under a projecting ledge of stone, as if the wren and its companions had threatened these out-of-season birds with destruction. I learned on that occasion that the vocabulary of this same Carolina wren was very considerable. It did not, as usual, repeat some pet phrase over and over again, but exhausted every variation of expression of which it was capable. Had I not been watching the bird, its identification would have been difficult. But



Cat-birds.

with the coming of May and the return of the migrants, the cat-bird assumes its position among them and is then no coward. Though it could not possibly be more plainly colored, this bird is an ornament to May. It is a bearer of glad tidings, and when moved to express its feelings, to give tongue to the emotions

common to all birds at this joyous season, there is melody, exquisite melody, in the song that it pours forth on the flower-scented air and sends echoing through the tangled thickets and over the weedy meadows. Is this wonderful song learned in the south, where the mocking-bird may be the teacher, and as the weeks roll by gradually forgotten? During May I have heard the cat-birds sing such a marvellous series of melodious notes that it seemed as if some wonderful songsters of another land were disguised in their plumage. When the orchard is as fairy-land in pink and white array the cat-bird enters into the spirit of the scene and, moved by the magnificence of the stage upon which it treads, sings with an exultation that magnifies the sweetness of every note it utters. Not a trace of discord now. The world has been perfected, so the bird believes, and every thought and shade of feeling is turned to music.

Why called cat-bird? Is it feline in disposition? By no means. Then why by name? Therein lies the secret of the bird's misfortune, for the prejudice against it is as wide-spread as the geographical range of the bird, and is, I fear, ineradicable. Unfounded prejudices are always the deepest rooted and draw additional vitality from every attacking object. It might possibly be much better to say nothing about the matter, and as years roll by let the ill feeling die of neglect, as often happens when the world moves on as if it had never existed. But, keeping closer to our subject, we find—or think we do—that after the nesting is over

and only commonplace cares concern the bird, the song that charmed is sung no more, and while we are yet hoping and expecting at least one more repetition, we are greeted with a complaining *mēē-āā*, or something like it, that is decidedly cat-like, and, what is worse, sounds much like the "bah!" of impudence in reply to a civil question. No one likes this cry of the cat-bird. It suggests insult; and, while the man will turn away in disgust, the boy will reply with a well-aimed stone that requires all the bird's alertness to dodge successfully; and this *mēē-āā* is all we hear until the birds leave us in mid-autumn. If nothing succeeds like success, as illustrated by the cat-bird in the orchard, then nothing fails so completely as failure, as shown in the vocal efforts of this voluble bird during the late summer and fall. Do one thing well and perfection is expected in all directions; yet who among men and which of the birds has ever reached this high degree? The cat-bird has reasons for not singing in August, and for what we interpret as complaining instead. It is none of our business. We are wholly unreasonable. There is enough sweetness in the May-day orchard song of the bird to remain with us as a delightful recollection until May-day comes again, and for this we should be thankful. The musical cat-bird is a distinct success; the fretful cat-bird, on the other hand, is not a failure. If we ignore its voice and consider its ways, we are sure of abundant entertainment, for let it be understood at the very outset that the bird means well and has no thought of showing

any prejudice against us. It returns good for evil in all cases. After the nesting-time, when food is perhaps becoming scarce, these birds will come quite up to our houses in search of something to eat. If not driven away, they will daily become more frequent visitors, and at last, like the alien sparrows, a fixture in the yard. I speak now of the country and of those quaint old-fashioned yards about colonial houses where time has had opportunity to complete the work that the farmer thought he had finished some time during the last century. In one such yard the cat-birds learned to know the inmates of the house and were not afraid. They looked for their share of food when the chickens were fed, and never went away hungry. These birds did not repeat their spring-tide songs, but never forgot to show their appreciation of what was done for them: this was demonstrated by their actions; and nowhere in all the country round was there more or better fruit than in this farm's kitchen garden. This fact should be sufficient for the wise; but of what avail is wisdom where prejudice abounds?

Although our experience has taught us about what to expect during the latter days of April and early May, there are a good many occurrences in the nature of surprises. When we hear the long-tailed thrasher—it used to be called a thrush and turns out to be a wren—for the first time we wonder if it ever sang quite so well before. Is there not a little more vim in each succeeding note when, in melodious accents, this fine bird is preaching to us?

Its "song" is declamatory rather than reminiscent ; more in the nature of thankfulness and insistence that life is more sunshine than shadow ; the reverse of all which is the burden of the melancholy thrushes.

Not once in twenty-one consecutive years have two pairs of these birds failed to appear near my house and remain during the summer. I might call



Thrasher.

them high and low birds ; for those on the east side always build well up from the ground, while the west side pair build on the ground or near it. Otherwise there is no perceptible difference. They sing in the same way, with equal emphasis, and live with such regularity that they may be looked upon as feathered almanacs. They come together, sing at the same early summer date, and then substitute for their music

a harsh *chuck* that tells you of their presence long before you see the birds, and on the same day they depart. Perhaps the red thrushes, as my neighbors call them, are less methodical when away from civilization, for they are found far from human habitations; but those in and about my door-yard are painfully regular in their habits.

Like many another descendant of the followers of George Fox, I have often wondered what the Friends really thought, years and years ago, of music; nor is this strange, for they were an inconsistent people, as are all of us at this day, and among them precept and practice did not always go hand in hand. Doubtless, in those early days, if some great-grandfather condescended to look at a thrush, he commended the snuff-brown coat, though he must have gazed disapprovingly at the spotted waistcoat; but what were his thoughts when the bird flooded his fields with ravishing music? These good men did not presume to criticise Providence, but it looks as if some of them wanted to do so. Now, those who assume to know all about Quakerism will probably assert that this is far-fetched and absurd, but, unfortunately for them and many a Friend, it is true. There was, is, and always will be inconsistency throughout. Fanaticism in all directions, save dollars and good dinners, is an unfair definition, but enthusiastic interest in bird-music has been disapproved of in open meeting in Arch Street, Philadelphia, from the fear that it might call forth a love of melody in children. Yet how often has it happened that two Friends,

conversing together, have each wished that the other would stop talking because a thrush was singing, and yet neither had the courage to express his thoughts ! Another absurdity, says the critic ; but what are you going to do about it, my friend ? it is true. Surely it is not correct to say that critics are not truthful.

I shall never cease to be thankful that birds are no respecters of persons ; years ago even the cardinal dared trespass on the fields of a Quaker, and the oriole swung in his willows, and every gay bird of the migrating host raided his garden and danced at times and set the bad example of flirting ; and, while there was no singing in the house, there was a never-ceasing flow of melody



Wood-thrush.

in the orchard, in the garden, down the long lane, about every field, and over the wide meadows. Singing and merry-making everywhere ; and in spite of preaching and frowns and every mild repression of the musical instinct in children, there existed a secret thankfulness in the old Quaker's heart that the birds about him were never-failing sources of sweet sounds. That "local color" or "atmosphere" or "peculiar

something" which the critics prate about, but have never yet defined, is a myth. There prevails, however, among Quakers, the same desire to appear to be what they are not as obtains among all conditions of men, of whatever race or country.

How convenient are exceptions! I was taken, when a mere child, by an old Friend who could cleverly imitate many a bird-note, to hear the wood-thrush sing; and how often did he send me hither and yon to look for the birds that I heard, but saw not! and little wonder, for his ventriloquism was the source of all the sounds that I tried to follow; and how he laughed—a wholesome, loud roll of merriment—when I at last discovered the secret!

At various times I have praised the wood-thrush,—which is a ridiculous assumption on any one's part, when we reflect upon it,—and suppose I shall be ready yet again if called upon to do so; but why should I? These frantic efforts to put music into print are painfully weak and unavailing. The proper comment is: go into the woods and hear the bird; not simply stay at home and hear about it. Is not this the proper purpose of a book describing the outdoor world: to offer an inducement to tarry longer in the garden and less beneath the roof-tree, to take a walk with open ears as well as open eyes? And that walk is well taken that has a singing thrush at the far end of it. If you do not return wiser, you will at least return happier, unless you are some pathological specimen with but a remnant of vitality not worth the having.

Of all our New Jersey birds, the wood-thrush is held to be the chief singer. It is heresy to think otherwise; and, having said this, what remains to be said? That marvel, the rose-breasted grosbeak, the cat-bird in May, the long-tailed thrasher, the wrens, the crested tit, and all the long list of summer birds stand out more or less prominently, but can never climb to the eminence reached by the wood-thrush. You doubtless think so, so does your neighbor, as also the community behind him. It may be true, but I do not believe it. I object to the melancholy that permeates the whole song. A poet once wandered as far as my house, and, after sitting in the shade of the old oaks for half the afternoon, remarked, "Your thrushes have been calling in vain for *Geraldine, dear Geraldine*. I do wish she would come or else that the birds would forget her." There was something in the way he put it that expressed more than the crankiness of a poet. There is a sadness that will tell at last upon even a soured old man, and the thrush's song comes within this category. Yet how we should miss them if the birds failed to come! This, however, I have never known them to do. There are old apple-trees in the lane whereon they have nested for half a century; there is a springy hollow, filled with grape-vines, greenbrier, and sumac, that has always been a summer home to them; a seckel-pear-tree that has weathered the storms of half the last century and all of this still affords them shelter as the sun goes down, when their sweet, sad song is heard above all others,—a song as

rich, as cloying, as the fruit of the famous tree. But among the lilacs lining the path to the spring-house is, perhaps, the place that I love best to hear these thrushes ; for, however grand the music, however perfect the melody, however complete every requirement that science demands, is not the charm, the subtle essence that reaches the heart, due to the thoughts that well up within us as we listen? Can we, in fact, entertain a thought of music wholly free from association? Is it not mere sound if it reaches no farther than the ear? To me the song of the wood-thrush is an invitation to dream, when it does not unlock the door of the dead years and recall the ghosts ; but this is not the place for autobiography. Given a dewy evening in early June, when freshness is stamped upon every living thing ; given the color of the season's brightest blossoms and the scent of its choicest odors ; given that mysterious purple light that fills the whole earth at the close of day, and with these the songs of many thrushes, and there remains no trace of harshness in the world. The thorns are dulled ; the angles rounded off ; we listen, for the time at peace, as if the dross of our imperfect selves had been taken away.

Incomprehensible as it may seem to intelligent people, there are still those who maintain that flowers are made beautiful to please man, and that birds sing for his delectation alone. Such rubbish is really unworthy of notice ; but I would like to ask, if this be so, why it is that the best music is heard and the most beautiful flowers bloom where some-

times for years together no human beings come. It is down in the books that as a musician the hermit thrush outranks all others of its kind. It is claimed to have a more spiritual song,—to reach in this direction a little beyond all others. I have heard this thrush in the mountains of North Carolina, in the woods and by-ways of New England and Canada, when hidden among rocks and trembling ferns in Northern Pennsylvania, and twice along the Wissahickon, near Philadelphia, I have heard it at its best; but is its song superior to that of all wood-thrushes? I honestly doubt it. There is such a wide range in the musical merits of individual birds that it is scarcely fair to make a comparison, and in localities where both species occur it would be difficult to determine which bird was singing. Does the locality influence a bird's song? This is not a silly question. No caged bird ever sang as well as its free brother, not even a mocking-bird; and may it not be that the primeval forest the hermit loves so well, with all its grandeur of giant trees, mossy rocks, still ponds, wild water-falls, and the companionship of nature's fiercest forms of life, inspires this thrush to efforts that we seldom hear in the tamer haunts of its cousin? but is not the less pretentious wood-thrush sometimes impelled to an unusual effort, and, so moved, does it not accomplish all that makes the hermit one of the musical marvels of the country? I may be wrong, but I have not yet been convinced to the contrary.



CHAPTER IV.

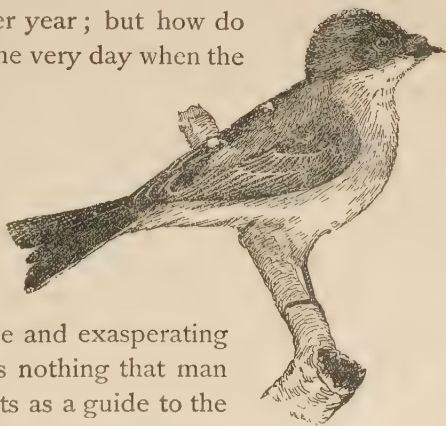
PROFESSIONAL AND AMATEUR.

THE popular names that have been given by everybody—which means no responsible body—to our common birds are about as contradictory and misleading as are the sound and spelling of some of our words. There is one prominent group in our avi-fauna that is known collectively as “flycatchers,” and so might be supposed to be experts or professionals in that line; yet we have catchers of flies that are far more graceful when so engaged and far more sure in their movements; that do not miss once where flycatchers fail many times. For instance, there are the wood-pewee, the pewees of our out-buildings and bridges, and the olive-sided flycatcher that merely passes through the State and summers in New England,—all professionals, so to speak. But what of the vireos, the swallows, and the night-hawks? If we could but gather some statistics we would stand on firmer ground, and in this connection I dare venture one or more assertions—not now; hereafter.

I have mentioned the pewees. The more familiar one is known to everybody, and it is delightful to hear its cheery call, often during the blustering days of March, coming as the bird does before the sharpest eyes can detect the slightest change in the weather beyond the later setting of the sun. At home there are always pewees in the open wagonshed, a pair under the floor of the bridge in the lane, and another pair on the top of one of the pillars of the north porch. These birds come as surely as the seasons; they are fixtures like the growths of weeds in the fields and of weedy thoughts in ourselves. The thought is, of course, a silly one, but I have often fancied one particular pair to be the same that I watched with wonder almost half a century ago. Pewees, like Tennyson's brook, come and go forever, whatever men may do. But over the garden fence, along the hill-side with its wonderful old oaks, and about the three beeches there lives all summer long the quiet, meditative, methodical, unobtrusive, plainly dressed, yet dear, delightful wood-pewee. No one can speak ill of such a bird. Even the bee-keeper will not say that it raids upon his hives. Perhaps it does, but I guess nobody cares; and I would willingly raise bees for its benefit rather than not have it within sight and hearing. It is a bird of the big woods rather than of the sproutlands, yet if there are old trees near your house, this pewee will come almost as close to you as ever did its cousin that is nesting on your front porch. But it is better to go to some birds than have them come to you. Door-

step ornithology is well enough in its way, and the more we have of it the better, but it is also well to keep out of doors a good deal, and probably nothing in an unexciting way is more pleasant than to meet this unpretending flycatcher down some woodland path. The chances are that you will find it perched well up on some tall tree, but where there is plenty of open space about it. The bird will probably make no demonstration if you pass quietly by, but, even when you are nearest, sighting some tempting fly, will sail into the air, seal the insect's fate with a cruel click of its beak, and before it has regained its perch sometimes draws out a prolonged *pe-a-wēē*, certainly suggestive of satisfaction and, as I have always thought, of laziness,—a complaint, as it were, that so much flycatching must needs be done before the desired "square meal" can be secured. Poor pewee! It is always hungry. I have seen it at sunrise darting at flies in the chilly, dismal, fog-laden air, and until noon, though the woods were as another Inferno, still at work, instead of resting when other birds were taking a nap; not even during the quiet of mid-afternoon, when the sun seemed to have paused in his career; no, nor yet at sundown, when even the last robin had chirped to the world "good-night;" but at last, when, in the fading light, its skill was no longer equal to the task, it, too, bade me farewell, its mournful, tired-out *pe-a-wēē* being the last bird-sound of the day, lost, except to sharpest ears, in the hum of a million insects and the din of countless meadow-frogs and toads.

Wood-pewees favor us with their presence for about six months of the year, but usually it is a week or two less than this. They want the foliage so far advanced that they may have to welcome them on their arrival that beautiful green light that fills the woodland in early May. As our seasons are noted for their irregularity, there being no recognizable law controlling them, so does the date of the wood-pewee's arrival show decided variations year after year; but how do they know to the very day when the conditions are suitable? This is one of the interesting problems of migration, for in our miserably changeable and exasperating climate there is nothing that man can see that acts as a guide to the birds, and yet they seldom make any serious mistake. Still, though



Wood-pewee.

this has nothing to do with the seasons, a dreary northeast rain sometimes sets in at the time of their first appearance, and then, weary, if not weak, from days of travel, they have a miserable time of it for a while. Their feathers are neither so oily nor so closely shingled as to shed the water, and could the birds not find shelter, many would perish. Such storms increase the mortality among migratory birds

to a much greater degree, according to my observations, than do thunder-showers, however violent, affect the nests and young later in the summer.

My most vivid impressions of the wood-pewee are of those that I have seen during still August afternoons. August is the month of completion. In no direction will you find a new activity. It is the month of rest from the burden, if not from the heat, of summer ; and when, after a show of activity on my part in the forenoon, I rouse from my mid-day nap and wander out to the three beeches, it is chiefly to see my friend the wood-pewee. The red-eyed vireo, tireless as the babbling brook, may be singing in its half-sleepy way, as if preaching under protest ; the tree-toad may be calling for the rain that never comes just when it is needed ; and the cuckoo may glide through the tangled maze of leafy boughs, a spirit rather than a bird ; all this may come to pass ; but suddenly all sounds are hushed and there is no evidence of life near by ; not a leaf trembles, and our strained attention is centred on the hope of some new break in the silence. It comes at last, and we are glad to hear the far-off, dreamy *pe-a-wēē*, sounding as if some awakened bird was yawning. The deliberation, the indifference, the entire absence of interest in the effect produced, as expressed by this bird's manner when it sings, are remarkable. It is as though it was a task that had to be performed, and the sooner it was over the better. I have seen hundreds of men who resembled wood-pewees in these respects. These pe-

cularities are common to no other bird ; but then, of an August afternoon, what more can we wish than this dreamy indifference ? It fits the time and season. Liveliness and activity are certainly out of place just now. If I knew that birds were gathered together at such a time I would shun them, at least until the sun went down. But there is a smouldering fire in the wood-pewee that can flash into full ignition on occasion. Let some bold beetle fly across the field, buzzing and humming as if in defiance of all the flycatching fraternity. Those loose feathers on the pewee's head stand up and tremble, those eyes that but a moment before were lustreless now shine like live coals, and the presuming beetle is at once pursued and captured. At times there is a conflict ; not every insect will slide without resistance down a pewee's throat. Never, though, is there any lasting battle. Soon the disabled beetle is devoured in part, and then what a change takes place in the manner of the bird's song ! On such occasions I have heard, as near as I could catch it, *pě-pě-pě-wě-wě-wě—pě-wě-pě* ! A sort of exultation, as if it had been twitted and replied with more energy than politeness. Again, while watching them during the long August hours, I have seen battles royal with moths and butterflies that came within the pewee's danger-line. There was ever the one result, the same sad ending for the insect ; but the fight, though always to a finish, was not always brief. I have often marvelled at the wonderful pluck of a half-wingless butterfly. Its efforts to outwit the bird gave me a fair insight into the psy-

chology of these "frail children of the air" so graphically described by Scudder. But these breaks in the monotonous routine of a wood-pewee's life are not many, otherwise I fear the poor bird would collapse. Though never idle, it is always methodical, and evidently abhors haste, perhaps hurrying a little more than usual when the beautiful nest is finished—a mossy cup upon the upper side of a straight, outreaching branch—and there are three or four mouths to fill besides its own. This additional care does not lessen the singing, even for a time, and the dreamy *pe-ā-wēē* continues to be heard long after the nestlings have tested their wings. Up to the very date of the pewee's departure it derives abundant satisfaction from its drawling song, and I listen with regret only when I fear that it is the last time I shall hear it until spring comes again.

Very different is the wood-pewee's cousin, the doughty kingbird. Here we have a flycatcher that is not retiring in its disposition; a bird of the open air; one that feels it has a right in the world and has the courage of its convictions. A lively bird that mostly squeaks, if moved to express itself, though it can sing in a humble way, it is said; but it makes amends for all vocal deficiencies by an exhibition of all the excellent qualities of bird-nature. A little too quarrelsome, perhaps; certainly so in the minds of crows and the larger hawks; but from our stand-point this is a source of amusement, we not being directly interested. It is a little strange that most people love to witness a fight, whether among

birds or men. In our daily papers the pugilist figures more largely than the preacher.

I cannot imagine a positively happy kingbird in a country where there are no worm-fences, those zigzag piles of old rails that invite all the weeds of the region and effectively defy the stingy old farmers



Kingbird.

who begrudge every unplanted thing room to grow, and who hate nature generally as they do poisonous snakes. The ornithology of many a farm in Central New Jersey is comprised in the bird-life that collects along these fences. Startling as it may seem, I have knowledge of one such fence—or what remains of it—that is more than a century old.

On the end of the highest stake of the fence, on the morning of the bird's arrival, this restless fly-catcher takes its stand, and there is just the merest

trace of music in its harsh chirp, for it is likely to be thoroughly amiable now, if ever ; it exults that the prosy sojourn in the far south is over for some six months, and that the days of a right royal good time are before it. There is little danger of exaggeration in speaking of the kingbird. It looks all that it is, and is all that it looks.

When the crab-apple-blossoms are in the heyday of their loveliness there is a lull in the bird's activity ; at this time its thoughts turn from flies to its fellow-kind, and the matter of courtship is, as it always should be,—so men think,—short, sweet, and sure ; either this, or the bird takes it for granted that one is as good as another, and seeks no explanation of the first refusal. There is sound sense in that, too. Now follows nest-building, and the structure, though not architecturally pretentious, is strong enough to withstand the storms of summer ; then for weeks the master lives about the old crab-apple-tree and, while apparently occupied only with its personal concerns, keeps an eye on its mate and defends its castle against all intruders. As regards chasing crows, possibly this is a matter of fun for the kingbird. I have seen them go very far out of their way to harass a carrion crow that had no intention of raiding their nests or coming within a mile of the nest-tree. It is possible that this dislike to crows is inherited, being due to conditions that have passed away, for these birds are not likely now to destroy a kingbird's nest, living, as they do, in constant fear of their plucky tormenter. When the young birds appear there is added the duty of

finding food for them, and this the male bird does not shirk ; but I fancy that there is to be seen a trace of satisfaction in the free bird's movements when all the humdrum details of domesticity are at an end. The kingbird has a fancy for the open fields, and does not forget them when confined to a tree at nesting-time. It likes the broad outlook and the easy life it may then lead, whether chasing beetles in the sunshine or swinging on a bending mullein stalk. I associate it, in the early autumn, with fragrant balm and boneset, catnip, pennyroyal, and all the cherished herbs that hung all winter from the old kitchen ceiling.

At this time, too, the kingbird is the apparent leader of a host of young birds that have yet to make their way in the world. It keeps to the stakes, while the mixed company of younglings line along the crooked rails as if awaiting orders. Orioles, bluebirds, warblers, tanagers, and many sparrows often rise from the fields or fences surprisingly like a well-organized flock, and the kingbirds are the apparent leaders. There is no quarrelling, but evidence of a quiet content prevailing everywhere. These mixed gatherings, the outpourings of the summer's nesting, are to me the earliest evidences of the young birds leaving their nests. We see them leave, and soon they are largely lost sight of ; but in September they reassemble, not kinds by themselves, but associated as I have described. In a few days they again disappear or separate, and the permanently resident species take possession of the land.

I have said that these gathered birds were always contented. I forgot the occasions when young sparrow-hawks came and tested their skill at bird-capture. Why does not the kingbird come to the rescue then? Doubtless it has the courage, but it is a question of wing-power, and the kingbird knows its limitations. This, however, I have seen it do: sound an alarm and so put every bird about it on the watch, thus indirectly baffling the intruder. It would be a most satisfactory thing if we better understood bird-language and the relationship that different species bear to each other. In other words, what does a cat-bird think of a wren, or a kingbird of a field-sparrow? There is constant association, and it is hard to believe that they disregard each other. Do class distinctions exist among birds? That small birds will band together at a moment's notice against a common enemy is evident enough when a sleeping owl is discovered, or a stuffed one is placed in a conspicuous position near a nest, as I have often done. Phew! what a racket is kicked up! But of late no picture of an owl has the same effect, although I had results years ago that led me to a different conclusion, and I do not admit that I was wrong then. There is a barrier between men and birds that I fear can never be broken down. Much as we know or think we know, there is much more of which we are ignorant, and recent literature has given us little reason to suppose that we shall ever possess all the information that is desirable.

We have many flycatchers, some as large as the kingbird and fully as prominent; for instance, the great-crested, which is almost constantly with us and has some habits unlike its nearest relations. It builds its nest in a hole in a tree instead of on the branches, and drowns the songs of other birds by its unending cacophonous fretting. A bird of spirit and of action, but so tiresome that before the summer is over we vote it a nuisance. These birds never miss building in the old apple-trees in the lane, but this year the pair that reoccupied last year's nest could not find a snake-skin, which is supposed to be a *sine quâ non* with them. I was sorry, for it argued a scarcity of snakes and therefore another step towards denaturalizing the country round about. They *did* have a bit of narrow ribbon, and I wondered if they took this as a substitute.

The olive-sided flycatcher merely passes through New Jersey on its way north, and again, in autumn, going southward; but in Northern New England it is very conspicuous. Thoreau makes frequent reference to it, and calls it, because of the noise it makes, *pe-pe*. Mr. Cram informs me that in his neighborhood the kingbird and the great-crested are very like in habits. Certainly, he says, they are equally quarrelsome and fearless, and adds, "I always associate them with hot weather and pine clearings and that peculiar aromatic odor of drying white pine tops unlike anything else. These birds spend much of their time perched on the tops of dead trees, and

of course launch out into the air after insects like all their tribe."

Rare flycatchers are sometimes seen, and I have found the yellow-bellied twice, once breeding; the birds were identified by the late Mr. Cassin. I also



Olive-sided Flycatcher.

shot a fine scissor-tail some years ago. Such occurrences, however, are really of little interest, except that they sometimes show that a given locality has a more considerable avi-fauna than the bird-men allow it,—a condition probably true of the whole country.

All the above birds are flycatchers by nature as well as by name, and have earned the title, but there is not one of them that in a given time catches as many flies as some other birds that can be named. Be-

cause of a pugnacious tendency that is always pretty well marked they are also called "tyrants," though it is questionable if they are more deserving of the title than certain other birds. However, this discussing the ill tempers of birds is not pleasant. And now what of more amiable catchers of flies, amateurs in that line, if we insist that the tyrannical kingbird and its cousins are professionals? As regards their skill,

I have amused myself by bringing deadly statistics to bear upon the question, yet not one of them but frequently misses its aim. This you can positively determine by close observation. It is easy enough to take a position, with the sun at your back, and watch a common pewee, a kingbird, a least flycatcher, or any one of the family. There is little chance of being mistaken, and the success or failure of the bird's efforts can be easily interpreted by its actions. When unsuccessful, it gathers itself in mid-air and makes a second effort. The insect has had warning, however, and darts and twists in a way that effectually baffles his birdship. We are so accustomed to look at these tyrant flycatchers in a half-interested way, and to take it for granted that all goes on like clock-work, that we are often greatly deceived. Not one of them is as skilful as it is *reputed* to be. They have to earn their living, literally, and the strain upon them must be enormous. Insects, it should be remembered, do not remain motionless in the air waiting to be devoured. Their flight is more marvellous than that of any bird, and here, as in all phases of life, there are grades of excellence, some being more easily caught than others; but when it comes to lively tiger-beetles and insects that are like lightning in their movements, it is more by good luck than by good management that a kingbird or a pewee gets enough to eat. On more than one occasion I have seen a flycatcher give up in despair and take a new position where the passing insects were not in such a hurry. Nor need a pewee's food

be always on the wing. They will rob a spider's web or pick a fly from a window-pane ; but in the latter case the concussion when the beak and glass come together must be staggering, and the act is not likely to be repeated. Do not set down the tyrant flycatchers as perfect in their art. There is no such thing as perfection in nature.

There are half a dozen species of vireos, four of which are found all summer in New Jersey, the others



Philadelphia Vireo.

merely passing through on their way to more northern localities. These birds are insect-eaters, and therefore catchers of flies, and I am quite disposed to award to them very de-

cided skill in the art. Not often do they launch out in pursuit of passing insects, though I have sometimes seen this done, particularly in woodland. Insects are sure to congregate where there is a wagon-road passing through the forest, and I have seen vireos dart out into this open space and return as any flycatcher would and for the same purpose. When not singing, vireos are eating, and it is a mistake to suppose that their food lies quietly

on leaves and twigs ready for the devourer. But little is obtained in this way, for to surprise and capture an insect before it can move is much more difficult than to fly after and overtake it. There are vireos in my yard every summer. Their nests are in the three beeches and elsewhere along the hill-side, and the white-eyes are always down in the meadows. These birds are very abundant, and it is no task to watch them closely. Their methods are different, but require equal alertness, and their skill is not to be underrated. They are past masters in the art of catching flies, and therefore a blessing to the horticulturist ; for their activity is unceasing and, like all insectivorous birds, they are always hungry. Vireos, however, are more interesting as winged musicians than as "feathered appetites," yet we are never much impressed by the performances of these birds. The red-eye's is a languid song, and when kept up for hours during the heat of a summer day, while the bird *may* be trying, as Thoreau suggests, to lift our thoughts above the dusty street, we are sometimes moved to wish that it would lift itself and give us silence. The white-eye's song is too energetic and "screechy" to be musical ; still, when we hear it ringing along the wooded slopes and across the pastures, it has a thrilling influence. It is evidence that others are up and doing if we are not.

Vireos are arboreal, and yet we can always see them. They do not intentionally hide in the tree-tops, nor are they afraid of man. There is a sickly, worm-eaten linden near my kitchen door, and there

all summer long the red-eyed and yellow-throated vireos have a happy time. They sing somewhat alike and yet differently, the advantage being with the yellow-throat. These birds undertook to relieve the sickly linden of its insect pests, but the task was more than they could accomplish. There was no quarrelling, and I often thought that they stopped a moment, in passing, to say a word or two. It looked so, at any rate. Then they would separate, the red-eye flying to some new twig, and saying, according to Flagg, "*Do you hear me? Do you believe it?*" And the yellow-throat—away up in the tree-top by this time—would call back, "*Doubt it? 'deed I do!*" And so the pointless discussion continued from some time in May until the cool days of September. I was in hopes that the tree would recover after such constant attention, but the twigs that drop with every winter wind leave me in doubt as well as the vireos, if that was the subject of their conversations.

What pretty nests they build! I have one that has been strengthened by passing a thread to a twig above those to which the rim of the nest is attached, thus affording additional security. The weaving in of this long thread and its overlapping and twisting are positively marvellous.

But the typical flycatchers—birds as much or even more in the air than any insect—are the swallows. In some respects they are the best expressions of nature's idea of a bird, and probably more nearly reach the theoretical point of perfection than any other living creature. Mechanically considered, they

are infinitely superior to man. We are supposed to admire skilfully adapted means to ends, and from this stand-point the swallow may be compared to a most delicate chronometer and man to a steam-engine. So prominent are these birds in every landscape, so fearless and inoffensive, that, as all birds should have done, they have really gained an entrance into man's affections, and I think no bird figures to more advantage in our literature. Notwithstanding this, I have seen a woman—or what I took to be one—walking unconcernedly on a fashionable street, in broad daylight, with the skin of a swallow on her hat ! Of course I could say nothing to her, but I swore at her shadow as she passed. To make impossible such a thing as the wearing of bird-skins is a task that statesmen might take up without any reflection on the dignity of their calling. There is a Department of Agriculture and departmental ornithologists, together with feeble protests and pretty pictures, much wisdom and more fruitless discussion ; all this in the capital of the nation, while throughout the length and breadth of the land bird-murder goes on unceasingly. I have heard of a clergyman who shot nuthatches for his dinner. From the sermons of such men pray to be delivered.

We not only have plenty of swallows, but they are of different kinds, so that the characteristics of each species are ever before us. We draw an invidious distinction when we say that the bank-swallow is prettier than the cliff-swallow, or that the white-belly is more trim than the marten, or otherwise set

one above another. They are all as pretty as pictures, and those that are not brilliant in color possess unequalled grace, for a swallow in the air is the truest poetry of motion; it is as if it and the air were one. You cannot take the bird from the sky without dimming all its lustre. It is not strange that the Delaware Indians called these birds "feathered spirits;" and yet they are, when we come



White-bellied Swallow.

down to the solid basis of fact, merely fly-catchers, or, in ornithological parlance, catchers of flies; but there is nothing of the amateur about them in this respect. They shame every kingbird

that ever launched into the sunlight of a summer day and snapped its beak at a bee.

In all matters, whether trivial or important, we are creatures of preferences. We fancy one thing better than another, though assured that both are of equal value. We always pick a sweeter bonbon from the dish than any we leave for our neighbors. It is the natural result of the imperfections of human nature. I will not pretend to say why, but my favorites among these birds are the white-bellied and the

barn-swallow. I love the former because I find it in the flooded meadows, skimming over the wide pastures that are often under water and over which my boat passes. I love it because it is so tame, and twitters in my ear, when I near its nesting-tree, "*Isn't this jolly?*" A far-fetched description of its gleesome ditty, perhaps, but then it is always the manner rather than the matter of a bird's song that appeals to us. A white-bellied swallow



Barn-swallow.

once alighted on the end of my oar, which I was using as a pole. Such a trivial incident may make no impression on some, which only proves that they are unimaginative and much to be pitied. I have always looked forward to the spring freshet and the white-bellied swallows, and, now that I have found where they nest and that many stay in the marshes all summer, they have become of even greater interest. Formerly they seemed to disappear soon

after arrival, except those that associated with the sand-martens and appeared to have nests in the bank, but did not. It is difficult to make plain what a charm there is in floating over flooded meadows, in riding where you have been accustomed to walk, and in moving without let or hindrance among quicksands and marshes which ordinarily you cannot even approach. Then it is, when the winter's snows on the mountains have been transferred as water to the plain, that I first meet the white-bellied swallows, and they seem ever as glad to see me as I am to be with them again. Call this a childish fancy, if you will, but it is the secret of the charm of many a spring outing ; and, after all, if I am pleased, what matters it whether you are or not. Some of us, as we grow older, become more selfish ; nor is this strange.

The colors of the white-bellied swallow are but two, dark steel-blue and white, but the purity of the latter and the brilliant gloss of the former make the bird pretty ; and when, with these, we consider its trim figure and marvellous grace of motion, there seems no room for improvement ; yet the barn-swallow is an even more attractive bird. Of equal grace and possessing every hirundine merit, this species has in addition a blending of several rich colors and a general metallic lustre that bring it close to those marvels of the American tropics, the humming-birds. The white-bellied swallow loves the wilder waste-lands, where it is usually found ; but the barn-swallow, as its name indicates, comes to us, at least to those who live in the

country. How vividly I can recall delightfully lazy days when I have clambered into the mow and, resting at full length on the hay, looked upward and marked the flight of the barn-swallows that came and went through some knot-holes in the wall ! The bright, brassy sunshine out of doors entered here only as great bars of light and did not dispel the gloom that was the charm of the place. I could see nothing very distinctly, and the nests against the rafters had long since been abandoned, but the birds still came and went and twittered as lively in the shades of the mow as in the glare of the fields. Gay messengers from the outside world, they brought me only such tidings as I wished ; they humored my whims and so endeared themselves. It is not strange that I still go into barns to look for the nests of these charming birds, and, seeing them, even if it be winter, I hear again the merry twitter, I recall the pleasant tidings brought me years ago,—the fancies never realized,—and I feel the warmth of June, though standing in the sunshine of January. Birds, like bird-songs, should be valued for their suggestiveness rather than for any intrinsic merit.

While wasting time one pleasant May morning with men who dabble in archæology, and looking for traces of Indians that, when found, could not possibly tell us anything new about these people, I was startled by a whirl and flapping of wings that seemed directed towards me. I looked around in a dazed way, but could see nothing, and then again

came the whir and shadow of wings in my face. It was a night-hawk, and I had either stepped upon or was very near the bird's eggs. I stood perfectly still and examined every square inch of ground near me, hoping to prove the excellence of my eyesight by discovering the eggs. The archæologists approached, attracted by my statue-like pose, but I motioned to them to keep away. They could not see the night-hawk, and concluded that I was crazy, but I kept



Night-hawk.

them off until I gave up searching for the eggs. "In a fit?" called one of them. All this time the night-hawk was almost striking me in the face, and yet neither of them saw the bird. Sharp-sighted men, observing men, who complain that they cannot find stone axes in a gravel bed. Later I searched the ground—a stony field—with the greatest care, and at last succeeded. What puzzles me now is how the

bird ever found her nest after once leaving it. What eyesight a night-hawk must have to distinguish its eggs, in this case as a single pebble among ten thousand ! To my eyes there was nothing approaching a landmark near the spot that, by reason of the eggs' presence, might be called a nest.

Unlike the whippoorwill, I do not associate night-hawks with spring or even early summer, at which times they have never been prominent features of the landscape ; but during August, and from that month until frosty weather, they are the birds of the gloaming, and the sunset sky, be it never so brilliant, would lose a charm were not these strange birds forever darting to and fro. Their flight is swallow-like, and, if not quite as graceful, has sufficient charm to keep us on the watch and ever wondering by what subtle power they can dart and twist and dive, catching insects all the while, and yet find time to sing after a fashion. I say, "sing," because the note is not harsh and is too frequently repeated to be classed as a mere impatient ejaculation, which was at one time my impression ; but during the summer of 1895 the birds were unusually abundant, and I often took my stand on the highest point of a rolling field, where, remaining quiet, the night-hawks came near. While the glow of the setting sun was yet across the landscape the birds remained high in the air, and it was not until the vesper-sparrows had ceased singing that the night-hawks came nearer to the earth. There seemed reason for this. There was a warm stratum of air on the level at which I stood, and into this

the insects rose from the damp depressions near by. This I could see ; and now to meet them came the night-hawks. To stand like a statue and heroically ignore the mosquitoes was very tiresome ; but I was repaid. I saw more clearly and heard more distinctly these strange birds of the gloaming and of the night, for when the darkness deepened and every object became indistinct, the whir of their wings and their happy expressions of content still trembled in the air.

That the night-hawk seldom misses its aim, that it is an expert in its line of insect-capturer, will not be denied. In this respect I rank it next to the swallow and superior to the pewee.

After all, in this matter of catching flies, is it not the truth that the "professionals"—the tyrant fly-catchers—are the "amateurs," and not far advanced at that ; while the "amateurs," if judged by their measure of success, are the real "professionals" ?



CHAPTER V.

OUR OLD-GARDEN BIRDS.

ON the outskirts of an old village stands a quaint cottage, built early in the last century, and as yet unmarred by any modern improvements. Most appropriately, it is occupied by old people. A weather-beaten board at the little gate has painted upon it "Cakes and Beer," and there is not a youngster in the neighborhood, nor an adult either, but will testify to the excellence of the foaming beverage and spicy gingerbread that are ever ready for the hungry and thirsty wayfarer. For many and many a year there has been a constant dropping of pennies upon the little counter or into the wrinkled palm of Aunt Peggy, whose "Thank thee" is veritable music to him who recalls it as the same voice that sounded so sweetly in the long-gone, unappreciated days of early childhood.

In the course of a recent ramble I passed by that quaint cottage for, perhaps, the thousandth time, and, the back door being open, caught a glimpse of the old garden, which I had not visited for almost half

a century. It was just the same now as then, save the added growth to the hedge, lilacs, willow-, and gaunt, wrinkled quince- and pear-trees. A narrow path, margined by box, led to the open well, with thick mats of moss about the stepping-stones that faced the curb; and where the few vegetables had not been planted there was a wealth of flowers in full blow, in bud, and, though so near the end of summer,—it was August now,—with a promise of abundant blossoms yet to appear.

A crooked cedar post by the well was not the least attractive feature. A coral honeysuckle and a trumpet creeper struggled for supremacy, and both were well laden with bright flowers. How the humming-birds buzzed about them!—not fighting, but forever threatening, I thought; and the bees, butterflies, dragon-flies, and beetles,—what goodly store of sweets they all found! and not for an instant was there positive silence. Their humming was incessant and made excellent bass when the treble of joyous birds sounded from overhead or struggled through the foliage of the thick-set shrubbery. The oriole's whistle was the first clearly distinct sound that I heard, and the nest that had been in use three months before was almost within reach. The bird itself was merely revisiting old scenes, and I was not surprised to hear from Aunt Peggy that at nesting-time they are too noisy for comfort. "These hang-nests never fail to come, and always build in that weepin' willow. I don't know a season when they missed," said Aunt Peggy. But I have not

Baltimore Oriole.



observed such regularity. In my own yard, in the summers from 1874 to 1895, these birds have been absent but four times, and during the twenty-one years have nearly equally divided their attentions, as regards nest-building, between a sycamore and an elm. The rule has been to alternate, and it has been pretty closely adhered to. The beauty and intelligence of orioles are to be commended, but there is too much edge to their whistle : it cuts the ear instead of falling gently upon it. If indulging in a day-dream, we are startled, not merely roused, by its suddenness and shrillness. The orioles that stay with us after nesting-time are never musical.

The day is not far distant when Aunt Peggy and her husband will pass away, and the old garden, so long a landmark, will be of interest only as regards local history. Place and people, the old cottage and its occupants, are so well fitted to each other that we cannot dissociate them ; but young people would be out of place here. A new roof must cover young heads, it seems. The old is forever giving way, but is it always to better as well as newer things ? New flowers, at least, are not in every case an improvement upon the old. What has the present to show that is an advance over an old apple-tree and the bluebirds ? Certainly not a japonica hedge and the English sparrows.

The blessed bluebirds ! Why are they so seldom seen where but a few years ago they were abundant ? For many years they were literally resident in a hay-barn near my house, never leaving it longer than

pigeons do the dove-cot ; but this was an unusual occurrence, an exaggeration of their ordinary habits. The miserable intrusive sparrow is in part to blame, but our own indifference is far more culpable. The men who have made efforts to keep down the English sparrow and aid the bluebird are too few in



Bluebird.

number, and yet the task is not onerous, for sparrows are easily outwitted and bluebirds quick to discover the truth. Time was when the garden had as surely its boxes for wrens and bluebirds as its daffodils, heart's-ease, and yellow roses. The presence of these birds was a matter of course ; not a necessity, perhaps, but so near it that they were

never overlooked. In all respects we of the present day have not kept pace with common sense. Of late, the bluebird is fast becoming a bird of the backwoods ; one that we hear when it is passing from forest to forest, high overhead, and ignoring us. So lately a bird of the garden, even to those who lived in town, and now banished ! We deliberately drove them away, and now, like fools, wonder why they went.

The bluebird is delightful everywhere and at all times, but never was it more charming than when it warbled on a May morning in the reawakened old gardens, rejoicing to return to its nesting-home, and seeming to give thanks to man for his thoughtfulness. The old world then seemed new again, and may it not have been that old people, hearing the sweet song, felt something like a renewal of their youth ? There would have been nothing strange in this.

But this is neither the time nor the place to be sadly retrospective. What of the good gifts of the passing moment ? What of the flowers of the passing summer ? What of the birds ? I noticed to-day in Aunt Peggy's old garden that the English primrose had had its day and the poppies were past their prime. The flaming phlox was no longer the principal feature, as it had been, and the spiræas were only a thrifty growth, in which the song-sparrows still lingered, although their nests were empty. But what a show of dahlias and hollyhocks ! The sight was a dazzling one. Crimson, gold, white, and deli-

cate shades of pink and purple lined the lichen-covered fence, that was almost concealed by the stout stalks of these showy plants. And how natural was the remark of Aunt Peggy, "They ain't as pretty as last summer ; somehow the season wasn't quite right" ! Did the man or woman ever live who was quite contented with what is ? How flowers could be brighter I cannot imagine ; and how the trim gardens of these later days pale in comparison !

It should be remembered, too, that many of our native wild flowers can be transplanted without injury, and will flourish even better in gardens than in fields or meadows, where the struggle for existence is always fierce. Our native plants, like our native birds, are not sufficiently well known. In this matter our grandfathers were wiser than we. They had a loving regard for many a wild growth and garden flower almost unknown to us. The birds, too, observed less distinction between town and country. The mere fact that houses occur here and there does not frighten a bird, if about these houses are the trees and bushes it loves. As I stood looking with admiration at the display in this unpretending spot, I heard a loud lisp, and, turning my head, I saw a dozen cedar-birds in the cherry-tree. "I thought they would take 'em all," said Aunt Peggy, "when they came about June, but they left me plenty," and the old woman smiled as she thought of the pleasant ending to her fears.

"This they always do, in spite of what Farmer Greedy says," I replied ; but here the conversation

was interrupted. The arrival of a customer caused me to be left alone for a short time, and, sitting by the well, I quickly drifted into dreams of other days. Have we been wise, I mused, in discarding so much that characterized old times, even in such a matter as garden flowers? for admitting the greater charms



Cedar-bird.

of importations, they do not seem to attract the birds. My eyes fell upon the showy cone-flower that had been brought from the near-by meadows, and in one corner of the garden there was a thrifty centaury, now a mass of bright pink-purple bloom. Why this latter flower is so generally overlooked is

a mystery to me. Few exotics with similarly colored blossoms can compare with it.

From the wavy willow branches almost overhead there trickled down a broken roll of gutturals, and I looked for the cuckoo that I knew had uttered them. What a strange bird this is! It seems to fly only when passing from tree to tree; it glides through the branches. It will—it does—pass near



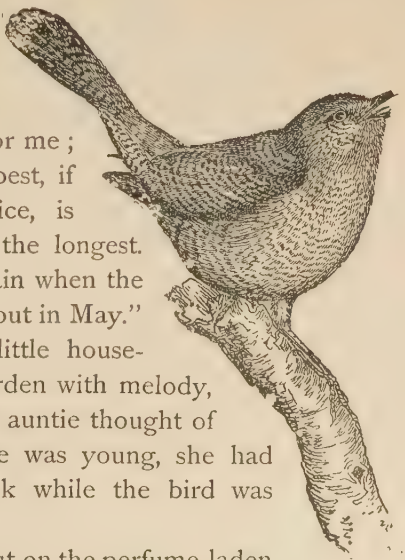
Cuckoo.

you, time and again, all summer long, without your suspecting its presence. I have been assured that its cry was the complaining of a tree-toad. *Kek-kek-o, kek-kek-o, ko, ko, ko*; there is the sound again, and I see the bird gliding from limb to limb of the willow without causing the slenderest twigs to tremble. It gives me the impression of an unhappy spirit, doomed to wander and worry throughout all time; and I was not surprised when I read that the Rus-

sian cuckoo is said by the peasants of that country to be the soul of an unbaptized infant. The peasants hold out some hope for it, but our cuckoo is too uncanny a bird for us to believe that it will ever return to happier conditions.

"I have flowers from April to the end of fall," said Aunt Peggy, when she returned, "and I don't have no favorites; they're all good enough for me; but what I like best, if there is any choice, is them I remember the longest. I'm just young again when the yellow rose comes out in May." As she spoke, a little house-wren filled the garden with melody, and I fancied that auntie thought of the days when she was young, she had such a far-off look while the bird was singing.

"Shop!" rang out on the perfume-laden air, and Aunt Peggy was gone. It was a hot August day and everybody was thirsty, so I was again alone. Looking about me, I saw the shadow of the cuckoo fall across the path, and marking the direction taken by the bird, my eyes fell on a wren's mossy mansion near the kitchen door. The cuckoo was forgotten. Above the wren's home on the low eaves was a box of house-leek that drooped grace-



House-wren.

fully and shaded the little minstrel's home. It was a pretty sight.

The wrens are pugnacious, and at times have hard struggles because of the sparrows' numbers, but they have not fared so ill as the bluebirds. They still remain with me from April until frost, housed in boxes that no sparrow can enter, and when the wren is at home they dare not approach. As a domestic bird the house-wren is, or, more correctly speaking, was, a close second to the "chippy," and some claim first place for it. At times it appears even tamer, because it is not afraid of cats, and will snap defiance in tabby's ears as she sleeps on the sunny side of the garden fence; and it can do what, possibly, the poor "chippy" cannot,—that is, sing. It makes the whole door-yard thrill when it pronounces its satisfaction with May mornings. In the good old times the wren made an excellent impression; people regarded it lovingly and built houses for it, and looked in spring for its coming and saw it depart with regret. All this was outgrown in later years. Novelty became the order of the day, and, with a grand flourish of trumpets and a promise of endless benefits, the English sparrow was imported! The birds of the country were asked to retire; they were not fashionable; they suddenly became poor country cousins that caused the city folk to blush, and accordingly the parks and gardens were all besparrowed. Music was banished and chatter substituted, precisely as in many a drawing-room we see abundant silliness and little sense.

Poor house-wren, how I pitied you ! but not so much now as formerly. I have seen more of the world, and it is evident that you have escaped a great deal by forming new associates in the backwoods. You see a better class of mankind than you would have done had you remained where people most do congregate. Now that the mischief is done, there are those who regret the officious activity of ignorance and curse the folly of such an act as the introduction of these worthless sparrows. It were better to annihilate them than to enforce the Monroe doctrine ; but alas ! to do the former is now impossible.

There are times when some birds would be out of place : crows at a funeral, for instance ; but give me larks at a wedding. We cannot break in upon our established customs without discomfort, and to hear in December what belongs to June, although it may be in a measure musical, yet lacks the proper sweetness. A bird's song, like many a summer fruit, is not always in season ; and this leads to the question, When is the familiar house-wren's song heard at its best ? We hear it for six months of each year, and there is as much animation in the last song as in the first ; but to extract all its charm, to fathom the full meaning of every syllable, I prefer that it break without warning on the stillness of a Sunday afternoon in June. A mere fancy of mine, this, and meaningless, it may be, to others ; but it was then that all was quiet on the farm, even to the restless children ; it was then that the old people

took their mid-day naps after charging the youngsters to make no noise. Even the old dog was drowsy and scarcely shook the tormenting flies from his ears. It was then, while I was wondering if grandpa would ever wake up or auntie open her eyes, that the wrens, as if on mischief bent, would sometimes come close to the open window—peep through the blinds, I thought—and send a torrent of music rushing through the room. Then grandpa would start, and auntie, rubbing her eyes and realizing that the birds and not the children were at fault, would give the signal for a dash out of doors. I learned to love the wrens many a year ago. Is it any wonder that I love them still?

It was time to go ; I had an engagement to meet ; but, before leaving, I turned, scarce knowing why, to the fields beyond the boundary of Aunt Peggy's garden, and there, too, were flowers in abundance. The climbing bittersweet almost hedged them in, and along the brook the boneset and Joe-Pye weed flourished in tropical luxuriance, but not to the exclusion of other flowers, while slender lizard's-tail and golden dodder contributed their brilliance to the painted meadow, and the twittering of birds everywhere added to the charm. Mere twittering of birds of many kinds ; the half-expressed assertion of their happiness ; but it gave complete assurance of their near presence, which ever keeps the rambler in good humor with himself.

How well these wild flowers keep the record of the year ! Were all almanacs lost and every clock de-

stroyed, and were clouds to obscure the sky, the time of year and the time of day could still be closely reckoned, except in winter, by the coming and going of the flowers.

Leaving the garden at last, I was soon on the well-kept lawn of a pretentious house. Not a weed had escaped the scythe, and the grass seemed like a green carpet that hid the earth. Here, everything gave evidence of man's presence, and there was too little of unrestrained nature to be pleasing to one who loves fields and hedge-rows. I could not withhold my admiration of many a strange exotic bloom, but I was not at ease; ever before me was a more beautiful picture of the simpler charms of the quaint old village garden wherein I had lovingly lingered but an hour before.

I had occasion to visit this same garden again in January. Aunt Peggy was sitting close to the little stove and complained of rheumatism. She had escaped until over eighty, but did not take that into consideration. I asked about the garden, and she looked at me in blank surprise, as though she thought that gardens, like summer birds, went away during the winter. "There's nothin' to see out o' doors this time o' year," was her reply.

Nothing to see! If there ever was a fallacious statement this is one, and yet how very common! Nothing to see! Did you ever look at the seed-pods of skull-cap covered with feathery frost, or the skeletons—do not shudder—of plants sparkling with dew? Even the bleached bones of the nosegay you

tossed aside last August are beautiful when encased in crystal and reflecting the level rays of a midwinter setting sun. Is not the earnest outpouring of a happy bird's song as truly musical, as soul-stirring, in January as in June? At all events, this music is at our command, if we wish to enjoy it, and I, knowing this, had my doubts about the old garden



Red-bellied Nuthatch.

White-bellied Nuthatch.

being so desolate. I gave some commonplace reason and went to the back door. As I supposed, frost had wrought no such serious ravage as Aunt Peggy would have had me believe. The box hedges were darkly green; there was woodbine with frozen but unfaded leaves, and, without exaggeration, birds in abundance. Just over the fence the blue-black snow-birds were seed-hunting in an old pasture, and

a shrike flew across the yard as I opened the door, taking the same direction that the cuckoo had five months before ; but, unlike that bird, it startled the garden's occupants,—a nuthatch, a kinglet, and a winter-wren. The garden, with its birds, was as merry as May-day, and I wanted to bring Aunt Peggy out ; but I thought of her rheumatism, and also of



Shrike.

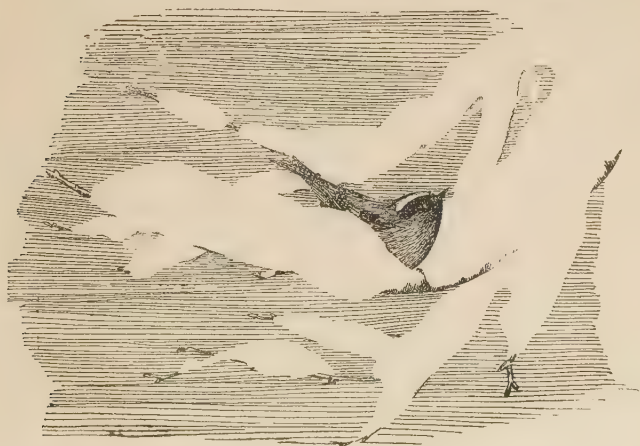
the fact that age loves to hug delusions. There was excellent hunting ground here for every bird. The trees met all the needs of the nuthatch, and his curious nasal ejaculation was heard above the singing of the birds out of bounds.

“Nuthatches have much the same habits as woodpeckers,” writes Mr. Cram, “but they are much smaller birds, square-tailed, and bluish gray in color. The white-breasted nuthatch [the one I saw in the garden] is pure white underneath, and the top of

the head and neck are black. When flying, the white breast and white under sides of the wings are easily seen. . . . They are steady, hard-working creatures ; but in early spring, as the pairing season approaches, they get a little unsettled and freaky, performing the most interesting and unusual evolutions in the air, darting out from the trunk of some tall tree, circling round like a flash, and returning to the same spot they have just left, and going through other manœuvres hard to describe and meaningless to human observers. And all the time they are uttering cries far more musical than any one familiar only with their unmusical voices would give them credit for." My nuthatch of the garden was quite commonplace to-day, if any native bird can be so. It was intent on finding food, and gave no play to feelings of a less prosy character. Had I gone to the nearest woods I might have found the red-breasted nuthatch, which comes and goes the winter through, and has much the same manners as his larger cousin. Mr. Cram says, "His wings are short and he darts in the most uncertain manner from tree to tree, more like a beetle than a bird." This peculiarity I have never noticed.

There was a kinglet in the gooseberry bushes, and when the shrike flew by I think it gave a mouse-like squeak ; at any rate, it darted away, but reappeared at the other end of the garden after some minutes, as if it knew of an underground passage and kept it open for such emergencies ; but it is such a wee creature that it can go where no other

bird dare venture. When looking for insects in the wrinkles of the bark of an old oak, it can be seen with difficulty, and at such times looks something like a little mouse until it spreads its wings and twitters more gayly than ever a mouse could squeak. There are two species of kinglets, the golden- and the ruby-crowned, readily distinguished by the differences indicated in the names. The golden-crowned is a



Golden-crowned Kinglet.

winter resident ; the ruby-crowned merely a passing visitor, though now and then a representative remains with us, and during the mild winter of 1888-89 they were quite abundant. Mr. Cram says that the ruby-crowned bird "has a song like a canary, only not so loud." The golden-crowned can sing well on occasion. I have heard them in June, in Northern Pennsylvania, make the dark rhododendron-shaded

ravines ring with their impulsive notes. During the winter you may see kinglets daily for a month, and conclude that they are silent, literally voiceless, birds ; but it sometimes happens, when the sun warms some sheltered nook until we think of summer, that this little bird will forget that it is January, and, under the influence of a day-dream, sing a few notes of its June-day gladness.



Winter-wren.

Very much the same may be said of the winter-wren. This "double" of the summer sojourner comes down from its northern home before the other wren departs, and hence has arisen a very common impression that the bird of the summer does not leave us, but, as an old farmer said to me, "Jack Frost puts a stopper to his singing." I did not attempt to set the old man right ; it would have been labor lost ; but I am not surprised at the mistake. As observed by me, the winter-wren comes

about the yard and generally occupies the summer-wren's haunts, but adds to them a range along the hill-side, where, among wilted weeds, mossy ground, and tangled nooks, it is really more at home. Every winter I find them in the old garden about the fences and the shrubbery along them. Their exits and entrances are made with wonderful celerity, and not so much as a chirp, for hours at a time. I love best to see them about the old bridge and the bush-hidden brook that crosses the lane. They dart fearlessly where other birds proceed with care; they come and go like feathered sunbeams, regardless of obstacles, and all too rarely pause a moment in their career to warble some trifle from their matchless summer songs. Like the Carolina wren, which is, happily, a fixture here, this little brown fellow is fond of spiders, and is often found, particularly after snow-storms, about the stable and cow-sheds, searching for them; but it must have exceedingly sharp eyes, for the coveted spiders are generally hibernating, and why any should show themselves when there are no insects flying is a mystery. Here, however, come the wrens, and there is not a nook or a cranny that they do not probe. Somehow, somewhere, these birds must find sufficient food, for they never droop. They are as active in March as in October, and leave us, I doubt not, in as good condition as when they came.

Do the Carolina wrens recognize in them a sort of poor relation that they have reason to dislike? There is generally a show of quarrelling when they

meet, and after the little brown bird has disappeared, the exulting tones of his haughty cousin sound very much like, "*you'd better, you'd better, you'd better!*" but this bird sings in such a curious way that you can make it say anything, reasonable or absurd, according to the range of your imagination. The same is partly true of every bird's song, and as I was bidding Aunt Peggy good-by, I heard, or thought I did, though the doors were shut, a crested tit saying, "*Get you gone! get you gone!*" I took the hint, and went.



CHAPTER VI.

BY MILL-POND AND MEADOW.

WATER that a century ago rippled through a ravine and at times rushed headlong down the mossy slopes, shouting, "Catch me if you can," at last found its master in a thrifty Quaker, who, in accordance with his creed's cardinal doctrine, was moved to the betterment of his estate. He caught the water, and it has seldom defied its masters since the dam was built, serving its present captor by turning the great wheel of the mill. If in so doing that far-seeing Friend drove chipmunks and mice from the ravine, he brought instead musk-rats and otters ; if the chewink and the oven-bird were forced to higher grounds, he brought the tilting sand-piper and the kingfisher to replace them ; and the tangle of laurel and greenbrier where warblers and vireos once found congenial homes is now covered by water far above their one-time nesting-sites, upon which rests the dabchick, or grebe, or duck, and when the sleet and rain drive across the pond, there sometimes comes a wild, weird, loud-laughing loon.

From the rambler's point of view, no harm has been done. The face of nature was changed, but not marred, for we have many thickets, many ravines and fields and woodland tracts, but none too much water; and who that loves a quiet country stroll but holds dear the bushy shores of a pond, its outlet, and the grassy reaches of the wide meadows? Fields and forests are alike shut in, as it were, but the true out of doors is near water, which opens up to us a new world. At this favored spot even winter deals kindly with us, granting all its gifts and withholding dreariness. These meadows and the mill-pond are always at a wedding and never at a funeral. It is a place whereat we have the heart to laugh, but not to mourn. But I speak only for myself. All my life I have heard the meadow-lark singing in dulcet tones, "*I see you—you can't see me;*" but my eyes were sharp enough to find this one perched away up on an old oak that overlooked miles of the surrounding country. The miller says that his meadow-larks sing better than mine, and I have been sitting at an open window of the mill to determine if that be true. It may be. These mill-pond larks have a fancy for a tall hickory that rises sixty feet above the water, and there is nothing to interrupt their music as it floats towards me. I am half persuaded that the miller is right. Is bird-music sweeter for travelling over water? Do the ripples free it of imperfections? I should certainly have envied the old man his larks had I none nearer home, but there are few weeks in the year that

they are not among the birds about us. Nor are they weaklings that mind the weather, but to all appearances are as content when the day is bitter cold as when it is steamy hot,—the worst of all conditions of what is called our temperate climate. Then, too, they are never quite out of tune ; though



Meadow-lark.

to realize what the larks' musical powers really are we should hear them in April. April is a peculiarly exasperating month. Too often we retire at night with an abiding faith that is weakened by a return of winter in the morning ; but be it even arctic weather, there is a renewal of that faith when the meadow-larks make the most of the fitful sunshine,

and chase the shadows with their ringing appeal to come out and see the beginnings of spring-tide handiwork. It is an assuring song, and therefore of greater moment than the sweetest melody.

As regards the habits of the meadow-lark, much depends upon the character of the country and the time of year. The term "meadow," formerly so appropriate, has lost its significance, and we are more truly descriptive in calling it "field" lark, for the lowlands have been largely abandoned for the up-land pastures; and in winter we could say "tree" lark without misleading, for this bird has always been a lover of the lone relics of the old forests, particularly those that stand alone and give opportunity for observing the landscape in all directions. "Outlook" lark would also not be a misnomer, though it must not be inferred from this that these birds are not much upon the ground, for they love to loiter in the long grass, to run like meadow-mice between the hassocks, and are cunning enough to hide and let you pass by, and then, when your back is turned, go sailing off in the opposite direction, giving fuller meaning than ever to my translation of their song: "*I see you—you can't see me.*"

While wandering over these same meadows on a golden-gray October afternoon, when the sun is near its setting, flushing myriads of sparrows from the weeds at every step, we are sometimes startled by a whirring of many wings, and a company of larks hurry to the willow hedges and the posts of the iniquitous barbed-wire fence. Every available prom-

inence is occupied and half the birds are singing. This evening hymn here in the lowlands, like the song of the vesper-sparrow in the fields, has a charm that loses nothing even when we recall the thrushes and grosbeaks of early summer.

Let us go back to the mill-pond by way of the meadows. There is a path along the crooked little creek, now as narrow and as ill-defined as was the old Indian trail that once passed this way, if indeed they are not identical,—a weed-grown, winding way with the wide world at our elbow. It is well to have nature within easy reach. Mere natural products are not amiss, but who cares for potted plants when orchids at home cluster about our feet? There are black and white birches to shade us all the way should we need shelter from the sun, and never were warblers more plentiful among these trees, every wrinkle in whose bark being a cup of cheer. All too soon we come to the great high dam, hidden in a young but thrifty forest of tall trees, and here, above the roar of the waters, we can detect the rattling clatter of the kingfisher. It is a thoroughly wild sound amid much that is artificial. This kingfisher, when in the gorge, is all activity, as if it caught the spirit of the leaping waters at all times, if not the silvery minnows from the black pool. We used to be taught that animals were perfect when amid their natural surroundings, that they were only awkward when away from home ; but the kingfisher does not always aim aright, and, judging from its actions, has not grown accustomed

to occasional failures. If my observations are correct, its impatience, if not anger, is aroused by a blunder, and it darts and dashes and utters its wild cry until exertion soothes it, when, leaving the gloomy spot, it skims the wild water-way until the pond



Kingfisher.

above is reached, and in brighter daylight wonders why it fails at times, or is it merely waiting for the next fish that comes along? Whatever its thoughts, in a moment its attention is centred on some object beneath it. There is a tremor through the loose-lying feathers of its crest, and the bird dives, this time with deadly aim, and emerges with a minnow in its beak.

Though most people will doubtless consider it a wholly unwarrantable assumption, yet it seems to me that if any bird sits still and thinks, it is the perching kingfisher, and in this respect I do not except our hawks. But I am an extremist as regards a bird's men-

tal strength, and all that I say may go for nothing ; so let us turn to another subject. If you try your acuteness of vision by looking for minnows where a kingfisher appears to see them, you will wonder what sort of eyes the bird has. Your experience will be that when the little silvery shiners do show themselves, it is but for an instant,—a mere flash of light and they are gone ; but in the black pool at the foot of the dam, where so little sunlight falls, as well as in the broad, open waters of the pond, the kingfisher singles out the victim that is invisible to us, and generally secures it. I have varied the point of view and brought all manner of artificial aid to my eyesight, a “water-telescope” alone excepted, without being able to see to any depth into the pond, and have utterly failed to solve the secret of the kingfisher’s acuteness of vision ; yet hour after hour the bird will dive successfully, not failing often enough to cause it to go hungry. For this reason, rather than for any special attraction in voice, manner, or markings, the kingfisher has always been peculiarly interesting to me. The old miller insists that I do not understand them, which is very true, for who can truly comprehend any bird? A proper study of this bird comprises more than the details of its anatomy and a knowledge of its habits. Call it what we may, there is a something akin to intellectuality that is recognizable, but yet beyond our grasp. The miller says that the kingfishers at the mill “know” him very well, and often come quite near, as if out of curiosity, when he is at work at the gates.

"Do they recognize you by your white hat?" I asked.

"No," he indignantly replied; "by my good qualities. These kingfishers and all the birds about here are my friends. Why, there's not a barn-swallow in the attic that won't let me touch it on the nest, nor a cat-bird or 'fire-fly' [he meant redstart] that won't come at call; and if it wasn't for gunners, the wild ducks would swim up the tail-race to feed. One funny little diver *does* come every spring and fall."

I had found a treasure in the dusty miller, and all my tactics changed. His inordinate self-esteem was in part excusable and more amusing than offensive. The man was truthful as this world goes; so I was all smiles and credulity, and let him tell me about the mill-pond birds.

"Somehow, the red-winged blackbirds take my fancy most. There's a cheer in the ring of their voices, when pretty near a thousand of 'em sing out together, that stirs you up like a camp-meetin' concert. Somehow, I've got in the way of always lookin' up the pond from the mill door for the first of 'em any time in February, and March doesn't seem such a bad month when the blackbirds are sprinkled all over the meadows. I can hear 'em, with a south wind, when they're all 'way down along the lower marsh. I like 'em; and no matter how the old mill rattles, if one of 'em sings out *ho-ko-lēē*, I'm right on hand and don't lose much of the music. Oh, it's fine when they pair off and get to nest-buildin' in the bushes across the pond. There's

never a day when the cock birds don't whistle their throats sore, I should think, but none of 'em get sick, to my knowledge, no more than I get tired of listenin' to 'em."

"But what about the other birds, along in early May?" I asked.

"Yes, they're all here, and they're all good in their



Red-winged Blackbird.

way, but they don't go to the spot like a red-wing," said the miller, very earnestly.

"Not the thrush?" I asked.

"Too solemn-like," said the miller, gravely. "I like music that's like the noise of children out of school ; good, hearty, take-the-world-easy music, and that's the red-wing every time. They have a good time themselves, and preach that doctrine in their singin', so it sounds to me. Somehow, I feel lone-

some-like when the big flocks move off, 'long late in the fall ; but it's a short winter for me when February comes round and they're all back again."

Think of it ! Suppose that such appreciative people were scattered all over the country ; what a paradise for birds would be every field, meadow, and by-way !

I let the old man rest for a few minutes, for I saw that he was gathering in the bird-full days of past years, and would soon be ready to answer further queries ; I saw, too, that I must lead him in the directions that most appealed to me, or his fund of coveted facts would never be reached. I needed tact, which I am not blessed with, and was lucky to-day in not blundering.

"What about the water-birds that stay around the pond ? I have seen herons fly up and down," I remarked, after a lengthy pause.

"Do you mean big and little cranes ?" he asked, in reply.

"I do ; but they are not true cranes," I answered.

"True ones or false ones, that's what I know 'em as, and of course they're here. Up at the pond-head they have their nests, the little greenish-like ones and the blue and white ones that fly over at night. 'Quoks,' they call 'em."

"Yes, they are the birds I mean," I said, impatiently.

"I don't see much in 'em. They don't come about sociable-like, and, stand where you may,

they're always on the other side of the pond ; I mean the little ones. Yet somehow they're sort o' cunnin'. When we had to draw off the pond, last summer, they just got crazy over the little fish and things left in holes on the bottom, and didn't seem to mind me so much : sort o' thanked me like for givin' 'em such a chance to get a square meal. But, after all, what can you see in a bird that's either



Green Herons.

comin' and goin' all day or else sleepin' on one leg? Now, the red-wings——”

“Do they always sleep that way?” I interrupted.

“Don't know ; but they don't sing, that's certain, any more than the big quoks that go over about sunset. When the mill's goin' all night, in summer-time, I have seen these big quoks light down by the water and walk up and down a little, and how big

the moonlight makes 'em! They're after fish, I suppose?" and the miller paused for a reply.

I merely nodded assent.

"Well, they must be pretty supple to catch 'em. I've tried dartin' a scoop-net after minnies, and it's more work than fun, and the herons, as you call 'em, have to go about it one at a time. I can see how a kingfisher can dive for a fish, but these quoks don't dive, do they?"

I nodded dissent.

"A shootin' out of their long necks and the thing's done. Well, it beats me," and the miller fell to musing on the marvellous things he had seen.

"Did you ever go to the pond-head," he asked, after a few minutes' silence, "and see the herons' nests?"

I told him that I had.

"Well, I went once and saw some fun if I didn't see the nests the birds had set up in the trees," and the miller began laughing to himself.

"Tell me," I suggested.

"Course I will; but I wouldn't if you was the same stripe," he replied.

"Why not?" I asked, in some surprise.

"Well, it was a joke o' mine, and this is how I shut 'em off. Some men came down here from town and hired my boat about sunset, and, by good luck, I happened to see that a stick one of 'em carried was a cane gun. It struck me all of a sudden they might be up to some mischief as to them big and little cranes, so I followed 'em, soon as dark, and



Night-heron.

'fore I went made a willow whistle that could out-screech a whole railroad. I saw they made for where the quoks and little cranes——”

“Hérons ; not cranes.”

“Well, herons, then, and I suspected they meant to shoot some. The pond-bank is in and out up there, you know, and I kept in shadow, and when I thought about right, I gave a blow on the whistle. Every heron, big and little, rose up, and such a clatter ! I heard one of the fellows say, ‘Shoot !’ but he didn’t, and I gave another screech that made everything rattle, and first I knew, those fellows was a-scuddin’ down the middle of the pond like lightnin’. I kept a-blowin’, only soft-like, on the thing, and followed kind o’ close. They thought they was chased and went on like mad. I was ashore, near by ’em, ’most as soon as they was, and, slinkin’ round by the back way, met ’em while they was standin’ under the shed, gettin’ their horse, and every one, so far as I could make out, was in a dead tremble. They didn’t so much as say ‘good-night’ when I went up to ’em, sleepy like, and asked ’em where they’d been.”

These beautiful night-herons, the miller’s “quoks,” have not fared so well of recent years, and there are now no large heronries within a day’s journey ; or, if any remain, they are so hidden in out-of-the-way corners that no one has discovered them. When I think of the slaughter of night-herons, I cannot find words in the dictionary to fairly express my feelings. On more than one occasion I coined

words that nearly suited me, and gave expression to them, too ; but my publishers declined to print them ; and so, under protest, I will pass on.

I was at one time under the impression that the quaint bitterns did not come here, but what an addition they are to the meadows ! That wonderful "booming" has all the wildness and weirdness of Indian times in it. Once I thought I would offer a



Bittern.

townsman a treat by conducting him to where he could hear and probably see the birds. He was delighted, and took up his gun, saying that they were "excellent eating."

I didn't go.

There is no sound in nature so hopelessly beyond description as the booming of the bittern. To a certain extent it is so far the same under nearly all circumstances as to be recognized at once ; but the

direction of the wind, the light or heavy atmosphere, whether heard by day or by night,—all these conditions go far to determine the impression made upon us by this wild and wary bird, whose cry may sometimes be mistaken for the noise made by a workman busy in the marsh, or a locomotive in the distance discharging surplus steam. I have sometimes wondered if ventriloquism was not a factor, for I have frequently heard the booming—this *ōōm-būh*—sounding as if it had travelled a mile or more over the meadow, when in reality the bird has been but a few rods away. When all the conditions are favorable, it proves to be a trisyllabic utterance, but not quite the “*O be gush*” suggested by a plain-spoken countryman, who said that “these frog-eatin’ grunterns once kep’ me awake o’ nights.” There is no such abundance of bitterns nowadays. They are seen alone or in pairs, and parcel out the country so that each pair or individual ranges over a wide territory unfrequented by others. The old miller said that there was never more than one pair at a time about the pond, so far as he had noticed, and some years there were none, he added, with some bitterness.

“There are no ducks now, like there was some twenty years ago. Everything looks the same to me, but it’s changed to them. ’Long late in the fall, when there was no more fishermen and picnickers, the black-and-white butter-balls would come in, and they bobbed about like corks when the water’s rough. One season I threw stuff out on the

pond, but they didn't take to it ; but the way they'd dive when I showed myself was worth seein'. There was no tamin' 'em, that I could find out, but I like to have 'em around. When there was a rousin' old northeast storm, whole flocks of 'em would take shelter here sometimes, but the gunners soon found 'em out and spoilt my fun."

"Wasn't there any other kind of duck on the pond?" I asked.

"Plenty, at times, but all of the come-and-go sort, except wood-ducks, that used to breed when there was big timber up the pond ; and once there was a pair of black ducks here all summer. They didn't show themselves much in the daytime, but I saw them every once in a while after dark. How they kept clear of those loafers with guns that's always around is more'n I can tell."

"Why, don't you suppose that a bird of any kind has cunning and knows a thing or two?" I asked.

"Well, I guess," replied the miller ; "there's been more'n one cunnin' bird around this mill. Why, the cat-birds and a little yellow singer [summer warbler, he meant] and a lot more got so tame I could go anywhere about 'em, but they didn't let a stranger do it ; and I was tellin' you about a little diver that came up the tail-race. It had side whiskers and a smart way of lookin' at you that showed it was up to snuff. It lived under the water as much as on top, and if quickness was all, it didn't make twice for the same minnie."

"Did it stay in the race?" I asked.



Black Duck.

"I never saw it upon the pond," the miller replied ; "but the little smooth-headed devil-divers are common enough, and often there's the blue coot and another one that runs along the shore."

The miller meant a gallinule by the one "running along the shore," a not uncommon bird, though rather shy ; but I was glad to hear of the common coot : "crow duck" the gunners call it. I have long known that they breed here and in Crosswicks Creek, near by ; but those wonderful bird-men who



Buffle-headed Duck.

have reduced ornithology to a "science" have also reduced the number of birds that belong to this locality. I imagine that the birds do not care much.

"All these water-birds seem to know it's unhealthy for 'em about here," remarked the miller, "and only show up after sundown, when they think everybody's gone home ; but they miss it sometimes. I wonder any bird stays about that's bigger'n a pigeon. If I'd told about that diver with whiskers,

it 'ld 'a' been shot on the same day ; but nobody looked down there for anything."

"It would have dodged the gunners, I guess," I replied ; "for a close observer tells me that those that he sees about where he lives, in New Hampshire, 'are usually pretty tame, and if shot at before they have taken alarm are easily killed ; but if the first shot fails, you may blaze away all day without any effect. I never knew one to be tired out by diving during constant firing. At such times they



Eared Grebe.

go perhaps fifty yards under water each time. Their flight is straight and tremendously swift.' "

"Perhaps ; but I'd rather have the birds that come here run no risk. I never get tired o' seein' 'em, whatever the kind."

The old man was getting prosy and I longed for a walk, so I turned back to the meadows while yet a little of the day was left. My thoughts still ran on the subject of our water-birds, and I was anxious to see some of them before dark ; but there was nothing now to attract them inland. The river itself was low and the creek almost choked with rank

growths of spatterdock and pickerel-weed. Be a place ever so bird-full, there are hours and days when it is quiet. I scarcely disturbed a sparrow as I pushed on through the bushes and tall grass and at last reached the creek not far from its mouth. It is always a pleasant surprise, when walking through gloomy woods or tall weeds that hem you in as effectually as a tropical jungle, to suddenly enter a wide open space. The world seemed very small before, but not so now ; and what an outlook



Herring Gull.

was presented by the wide river's still unaltered shores ! There was not a trace of man's work to be seen from where I stood, not even the roof of a barn ; and here many a strictly water-bird is likely to be seen. The common herring gull is no stranger here,—more than one hundred miles from the sea by way of the river and half that distance overland. After severe spring and autumn storms these birds are common for a day or two in the meadows, and if there is open water they are abundant about the river all winter. The old miller spoke of changes

that he had noticed during the past twenty years, but what a complete and pitiful change has taken place in this respect in about a century or a little more ! Then these gulls were here throughout the year, an every-day feature of the river, instead of, as now, an occasional one. Pelicans and true cranes disappeared long ago, and in a few years, perhaps, a gull will be a curiosity. In this particular region, where Nature has been lavish of her gifts, and has, as it were, called the birds, man has been



Tern.

more than usually destructive ; consequently these birds are scarcer than about most river-valleys. The same may be said of terns as of gulls. They are even less often seen, although it must be remembered that there are far fewer of them along the sea-coast, where they more properly belong ; but for their absence we alone are to blame.

When a typical January thaw occurs, and the melted and melting ice and snow come rushing down from the mountains, our meadows are often converted into pretty inland lakes. The summer pastures are some-

times covered to a depth of ten feet by the chilly waters of a winter's flood, and then what a place to wander in a boat! I always forget the cold and possible rheumatic pains while chasing the drowned-out musk-rats and laughing with the crows that float upon any chance raft that their good fortune offers. Crows are the business community of the bird-world, with all of the "devil-take-the-hindmost" element in their methods. They enjoy a flood. Noisy as they frequently are when nothing unusual has happened, they are even more so now, and there are times when I really believe that they laugh. They are great talkers, so why should they not have a sense of humor? But it is needless to enlarge upon this matter: they do, and that is the end of it. During these winter freshets I most frequently see the tern. It is literally a transient visitor, and for that reason seems the more beautiful; for birds are, perhaps, less valued when always abundant. How often have you stopped to admire a swallow? yet this bird in full career, seen against the dark-blue summer sky, is one of the world's wonders. Familiarity may in some cases breed contempt, but as regards any feature of bird-life it should not cause us to be even indifferent. After the birds have gone we realize what a blessing they have been.

Later, when the flood is a matter of dim remembrance to most people, we grow indifferent as to what nature is about; but while the river is still a swollen, turbulent, and rapid stream we may see, if on the lookout, the great northern diver, the

weird, wild, laughing loon, another transient visitor here, more common on the coast. It keeps carefully—by day, at least—in the middle of the river at its widest part, and can never be caught napping.

Mr. Cram, writing from Southern New Hampshire, says, "The loon is abundant during spring and fall. For two or three hours after sunrise they fly close in shore, and the gunners station themselves on Great



Loon.

Boar's Head and in boats off the point. Hundreds are killed. They have a rapid, direct flight, and as they approach the Head increase their speed to a tremendous rate and dash between the men, sometimes flying so low as almost to touch the grass. I am told that the spring flight comes just as the red maples blossom."

Even after turning our backs upon the pleasant incidents of an eventful day there is a pleasure in

store that dulls the sense of regret, however keen : the thought of being homeward bound. It is always worth the day's severest toil to know that home is never beyond reach ; but in order to fully realize what home-coming really means, he who spends his time in studying nature must be able to take with him distinct impressions of what has happened. There must enter no doubt even as to the smallest particulars. At home and at rest, we should appreciate more thoroughly and penetrate with keener vision into whatsoever transpired while we loitered about the mill-pond or rambled across the meadows.



CHAPTER VII.

“MORE NOISE THAN MUSIC.”

“**M**ORE noise than music,” such was the comment of a townsman who persists in coming into the country, when a lively golden-winged woodpecker chattered and chuckled as it tarried in the tree by which we were standing ; and not ten minutes later, when a downy woodpecker pecked vigorously on the dead limb of a near-by oak, this townsman remarked, “That makes what I said more true than ever ; one squeaks and the other bangs,—a sort of broken fife and cracked drum affair ;” and he laughed, thinking that he had said something very funny.

This is not a mere matter of taste ; the fellow was a fool to talk as he did. Can any healthy sound—one that has all the elements of unmarred nature behind it—be harsh and out of tune to those who really appreciate wild life ? Can man’s extreme artificiality so completely wean him from the less favored forms of life that their mere presence seems something to be shunned ?

I love to loiter. In the leafless woods, if the south wind is gently stealing through them, there is sufficient inducement to ramble and, while strolling in the forest by-paths, to pry into every petty cavern at an old tree's root, hoping to find at least an opossum and possibly scaring a mouse ; or to



Golden-winged Woodpecker.

gaze up into the interlacing branches of clustered oaks, or to wonder what may be hidden in the shadows of the impenetrable cedars. There is ever more than sufficient to warrant a walk in the woods, even in winter ; and when frost withholds its chilly touch for the day, it is pleasant to loiter there, to

stand still in the sunshine that revives our sluggish senses. Even though no squirrel complain, no shrew threaten ill luck by crossing our path ; ay, even if no birds be there, it is well to linger in the leafless woods. Trees are far better company than that hypercritical townsman. But I have seldom found myself alone in the woods ; I have only lacked company in town. The truth is, there is always a bird at hand, though we are often too blind to see it. All through my note-books occurs the expression a "bird-less" day. I doubt if any such ever happened. Usually birds will follow you, but at times you must search them out. Why? That is another matter. In the woods, at any time when one is likely to take a walk, the little brown tree-creeper, silent, it may be, as a frightened mouse, is somewhere hurrying about the wrinkled bark of birch or oak or peering into the narrow cracks of the stately beeches ; nuthatches, too, that fret in their progress over the same route, as if the smaller creeper had taken all their food ; or sparrows may come drifting in from the fields and twitter their satisfaction at new sights ; and down the foot-path way, where the oldest trees bear the burden of many a withered branch, woodpeckers will most likely be found. They appear to delight most, these wintry days, in the decaying remnants of old forests, and I am always ready to follow at their call. The long roll of their drum-like tapping has nothing forbidding in it to those who are willing to accept nature's offerings in the proper spirit. It is something more than mere

noise, except to those who are themselves “out of tune and harsh.” It is a sound that attracts, that bids us quicken our steps, for we are at once curious, on hearing the drumming, to see the drummer. There is no other sound in the woods or out of them, so far as I know, with which it can be confounded, and as its tone and other features depend upon the limb struck as well as upon the temper of the striker, they differ a great deal ; but the assertion that the different small woodpeckers may be readily recognized by their respective tattoos is a refinement beyond the appreciation of the average listener, and will doubtless be relegated to the realms of imagination by most people. There does not appear to be any set rule for their drumming, and the birds are too constantly on the alert, as if in perpetual dread of enemies, to test the resonant merits of all the trees, or to be at all precise and methodical when they drum for the mere sake of the sound produced. They tap trees because they are forced to to reach their food, and tap again to determine if there are grubs lurking under the bark, and tug vehemently at the wood when digging a nest hole, —all noisy operations ; and sometimes they tap more rapidly than ever, as if they enjoyed the sound thereby produced. That the latter statement is correct has been proved by many an incident. Mr. Cram's anecdote of a flicker or golden-winged woodpecker illustrates this. He says, “Not always do woodpeckers devote themselves to hard labor ; every now and then they will take a day off and

abandon themselves to the rapture of ungovernable drumming. I have known a golden-winged woodpecker to select a deserted bird-house in the orchard for the scene of his operations, and drum away in apparent ecstasy until he had almost rattled it to pieces. Another suddenly discovered the zinc ventilator on a school-house near by, and it evidently struck him as a most favorable object. He surveyed it critically, decided that it promised good results, and gave it a preliminary drumming. The racket was amazing, and the unexpected success which the bird achieved frightened him almost into convulsions. He fled precipitately ; but the fascination of the ventilator was too great to be resisted, and he returned with renewed courage. In a little while he became familiar with his success, and as a result returned again and again throughout the entire season. I fear his brain was turned with a triumph which was enough to make any woodpecker conceited."

Occasionally, at home, this same bird—"flicker," as we call it—will cling to the side of the barn or stable and even go so far as to peck a hole entirely through a board. On one occasion it found a loose end of a split board that, when struck, rebounded and gave out a resounding drum-like note that could be heard a long distance. The bird, like Mr. Cram's woodpecker, was delighted with its discovery,—that is, until I played a little trick on it. Going into the barn-loft with a tube filled with flour, I waited until it was wrapped up in its ecstatic drumming, and then puffed a cloud of flour-dust into its face.

What a wild scream it gave ! It is needless to add that it never returned. Like all woodpeckers, this golden-winged one has a range of vocal utterances, and can make any amount of noise by other means than drumming. But the term "noise" is not appropriate. It is always a welcome sound, a suggestive one, that calls up pleasant pictures only, and therefore is nearer akin to true music than many a wild "yawp" that rings through crowded parlors. Even the loose harp-string *ke-yeh* has a pleasant ring to it, and the *whit-cheh*, three or four times repeated, is a peculiar utterance that at once attracts our attention. Flickers are birds of the whole year, and it is hard to say when they are most entertaining. I like them best, perhaps, in August. They are then a meadow bird, and a ground bird at that, leaving the trees much of the time and chasing crickets over the pastures. They have not yet learned the value of mimicry as a protection, and so get up as you approach, showing a great deal of white feather, but not altogether through fear. Their coloring, did they but



Downy Woodpecker.

know it, blends well with dead grass and the mottled surfaces of old pastures, and by squatting they could readily escape detection, notwithstanding that the yellow quills and black feathers, when detached, are such prominent objects. At this time of year they associate in the most friendly way with robins, and large loose flocks of these very dissimilar birds may often be seen ranging over the meadows and roosting together at night in the cedars of the hill-side. These birds do not separate until after the initial frost and thin ice of late October, and even at this season, when a few warm days attempt a new summer on the ruins of the old, they still range the lowlands and, gathering in the tall shell-barks, hold a wordy rather than a noisy convention. The woodpeckers do not think of drumming now, or they would never miss the opportunity of rattling the long strips of bark that cling like torn ribbons to these meadow hickories.

One feature of the flicker's habits should not be passed by. They are not nocturnal birds, yet they sometimes work all night at nest-building; nor are they quiet about it: the *tap, tap, tap* is loud enough to attract every one of their enemies; but if they are aware of this, the fact does not disturb them. Do the other woodpeckers labor at night? In one instance, where the birds worked on an apple-tree quite near a farmer's house, they gave the impression of burglars breaking in, and consequently the family were kept painfully awake until morning. Only by accident was the truth discovered.

I wonder how often the tapping of a flicker has given rise to ghost stories that have never been unravelled.

The true sapsuckers, or yellow-bellied woodpeckers, in the days of great orchards and big



Yellow-bellied Woodpecker.

cider-mills and the distillery,—that is, fifty years or more ago,—were resident as well as migratory birds, and even now they are occasionally seen during the summer months; but it is in the fall, when the apples are being gathered, that we most frequently observe them. They run about the trees like the

common downy woodpecker and chatter or squeak a little ; then, taking to some tall tree, run to the highest point that will bear their weight and from it launch into the air and soon pass out of sight. Whatever damage they may do elsewhere, these birds do not check the growth of new orchards here ; all the sap that they take is easily spared.

It sometimes happens that we have a woodpecker day here in midwinter. Flickers, red-heads, downies, and perhaps hairy woodpeckers,—all may be seen skipping about the fences and racing up and down the fields like so many sparrows. Is it a migratory “wave” from the north? My notes do not indicate any special variation in the weather immediately afterwards. At other times of the year these birds do not associate to any noticeable degree, but it was evident, in the instances to which I refer, that their simultaneous appearance was due to something more than mere coincidence. The outreaching posts of the old worm-fences are favorite outlooks with these visiting birds, and when the sun shines on the bright red heads of one species, gives added glitter to the black and white of another, and shows the rich coloring of the golden-wing, there is presented a startling display that is long retained in our memory.

The three-toed woodpeckers of the north do not come here, it would seem, even as stragglers, but if they did, they might readily be overlooked. Mr. Cram says that “they are much like other woodpeckers and are generally seen in deep woods. One winter, six or eight years ago, they were quite com-

mon." When we consider that from Southern New Hampshire to Southern New Jersey is not so very great a distance for migrating or wandering birds to travel, it is surprising that they keep so closely to their proper haunts. There are no barriers to flight, and to even weak-winged birds two or three hundred miles is not a matter of importance. If there is a reason for the journey, they are able to take it.

Take the few woodpeckers that are native here, and include the now rare pileated log-cock, once so common, and it must be admitted that we have a noisy crew; but I do not use this word "noisy" as meaning a disagreeable sound. Far from it. We must consider the surroundings, the



Black-backed Three-toed Woodpecker.

time, the circumstances; it is the result we anticipate when a witness of what transpires; it is a pleasant sound, a meaning-full sound, and never a meaningless noise. Not, as that shallow townsman said, "more noise than music," but always, if we are our-

selves in touch with nature, more musical than noisy. Take away the little downy woodpecker from the trees about your house, and before a year has passed you will find that you have lost something that was far more valuable than you thought. To the townsman, "more noise than music," perhaps; but to the countryman, dear as the voice of a loved one.



CHAPTER VIII.

WHERE RUNS THE TIDE.

I HAVE not far to go to reach the river, and through the meadow ditches the tide flows even nearer to my home. Herein I count it good luck, for from March to November, either on the mud laid bare by the outgoing tide or along the sandy shore of the river, I can always find one or more representatives of the snipe, plover, and sand-piper families, those long-legged birds that teeter along the water's edge, closely imitating the ripples, with which they are in constant company. Except two or three very small species which are not gregarious in their habits, these birds appear to interest sportsmen only, who see in them mere "gobbets of venison" that more or less tax their skill to murder. As game-birds they have been as much written about as shot at, and it seems to be the principal business of some weekly journals to announce the good fortune of Tom, Dick, or Harry, who killed twenty yellow-legs at a shot, while nothing is said about the twenty more that, wounded, escape the gunner only

to drag out a few days of torture-full existence. On the other hand, I am not aware of any one having considered them in the light of song-birds, or, lacking melody, as ornaments to the waterscape by reason of their grace. And I am reminded here that these sand-pipers and allied birds are not all strictly aquatic in their habits. There are some that go to swell the great army of exceptions, one large enough to give a good deal of trouble to the army of rules, if they ever come into conflict. As we in all things desire variety, there is in the cries, as they are called, of the plover and the sand-piper music that seems peculiarly fitting to the localities where we hear it. It is exhilarating to see a hundred or more tattlers just skimming the sparkling waves, or darting erratically through the air, or running with marvellous speed over the bared sand-bars, and all the while uttering that clear *pēt—pēt-wēt* which is as truly musical and satisfying to the bird-lover as any of the more elaborate songs of inland birds.

In watching these birds, too, we are brought to the wildest and only unchanged spots of the country. It is even now possible to look at the water and the bared sand-bar, and see precisely what those strange and brute-like men saw who walked to and fro along our river-shore thousands of years ago, when the Great Ice Age was slipping back from the then present into geological history,—see water that centuries later was travelled by the Indian's canoe, and land that bore the footprints of wild life which have long since disappeared; land that was

pressed by the moccasin of the Lenâpé, a hunter as fierce as the wildest creature that ever roamed the river-valley. These pretty sand-pipers teetering along shore, singing blithely in their simple way, are so completely a part of all that is left of nature, unchanged and unchangeable, that he who loves an outing misses much if he fails, as the seasons roll by, to see and hear them.

Above the roar of the March winds, and in spite of a penetrating cold, I seldom fail to hear each returning year the clear, shrill call of the killdeer plover; and when that fife-like *kill-dee, kill-dee* sounds in the gusty air, I am sure that the first snipe of the season are cowering in the sheltered pools of the lower meadows. Very cautiously I draw near to the familiar "likely places," and stop suddenly as I hear the well-known "scaip" and see the bird twist and dart away, perhaps only for a few yards; more likely on and on, upward and still upward until a mere speck in the sky, then gone, then reappearing, and at last, after a second tarrying in mid-air, it dives headlong like a cannon-shot to the earth, and, turning instantly, alights daintily on its feet and probes the soft mud as unconcernedly as if such a brute as man had never been evolved. You may not see more than one or two these early March mornings, but later in the month and in April they are more abundant; and while you may pass many by that run from you and skulk in the long grass, others—perhaps fifty or more—will get up before you and hurry away, not one of them making the

slightest attempt at a straight line of flight. I once saw them in such abundance that my well-trained dog forgot himself and, leaping forward, caught one in his paws. But this bird is most entertaining when seen singly, for then only can it be watched with entire satisfaction, though to do this a field-glass is needed. They do not appear to be afraid of the open flats, yet never venture far from cover, and run to and from it in a manner not unlike the little sora or common rail-bird. I have had many an opportunity to shoot them while they were standing exposed on the mud, at low tide ; and as the daylight fades and the grass, water, and mud are obscured until they seem as one great uniform expanse, the snipe grow less timid ; they flit and flirt over the flats, and squeak and make merry after a fashion. All in all, it has been a pleasure to watch them, and one that I would gladly repeat if the birds remained ; but by the middle of May, or earlier, they have gone, except here and there an isolated pair that remain to breed.

Very different in every way and in all respects lovable is the little spotted sand-piper that every one about here knows as the teeter-tiltup, and a more descriptive name was never coined. I look for pleasant weather when the "teeter" comes ; for April is well advanced, the water-side plants are growing fast, the nesting bluebird's warble is in the air, song-sparrows are merry, and now, just above the waves of the sparkling river, I see them—the first pair of the season—hurrying along from point to point up stream,

as if looking for their home of last summer; and the pretty *peet-weet*, so constantly repeated, gives evidence of their satisfaction at being here once more. But these birds by no means confine themselves to the river-shore; they wander inland until every pond, every brook, every spring-hole has been found, and, once discovered, these places are sure to be immediately occupied. Amid such surround-



Teeter Tiltup.

ings I have ever found them, except when on brief visits or at unseasonable times, and in early spring I always look forward with pleasure to their coming, for they are to the water what swallows are to the air. They fill a place that no other bird can fill, and leave a painful void when they depart. They are not, so to speak, exasperating transient visitors, but come to stay, and are the life of the place

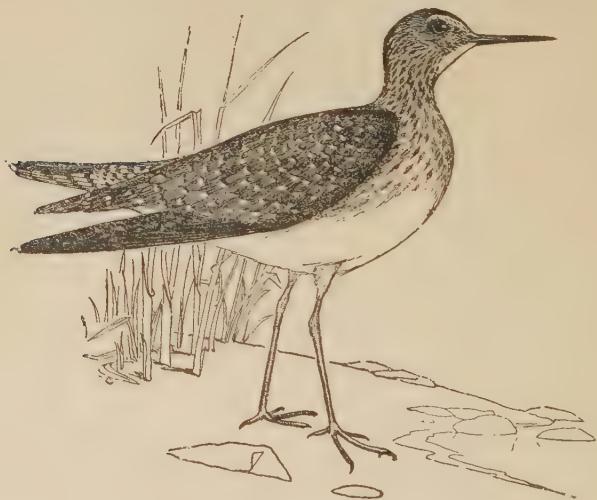
where they decide to nest. About the little hollow in the grass where their precious eggs are laid they hover with amusing solicitude, and their anxiety is unbounded when the eggs are hatched, for fear that some mishap will occur to the funny little "teeters" that for some hours have enough to do to keep upon their legs. They learn quickly by imitation, however, and can soon run through the thickest growths of grass with amazing rapidity.

Of the whole group of wading birds, this spotted sand-piper, the pretty "teeter," is the only one that even approaches familiarity with the belongings of man. It alone comes within hailing distance of the house, and, when encouraged, will even balance itself on the edge of the long water-trough in the barn-yard. It finds a convenient feeding-ground in the little, babbling brook that leisurely trickles from the spring-house, is hardly disturbed when the milk-maid trips down the path from the kitchen, and hops but to another stone or two if she pauses with her armload of pans. I used to think that the sand-pipers knew this young woman and looked upon her as half a friend; I know that she often watched these lively, light-footed birds and longed to possess as airy a step as theirs. No matter how much we may preach of the eternal fitness of things, this water-bird seems never out of place. It will journey up and down our old worm-fences, perching on every outstanding post, and yet lose nothing of the grace that it shows when resting on a slippery, shining stone just peeping above the rippled sur-

face of the river. Nor does its simple song of but two notes prove merely an interruption to our up-land melody. On the contrary, it is sweet enough to cause us to stop and listen for its repetition. A Scotchman with more prejudice than love of truth has called our sand-piper a mere harsh twitterer. He may have got this impression from a book, but it is evident that he never heard the "teeters," as I have heard them, a dozen or more, whistling their love-calls in the early hours of a bright May morning; he never had the bird come close to his door-step and sing as it poised on stone after stone of the brook that babbled by. If so, he could not deny that there was music in the bird's heart, and, when there, it is also on the tongue.

How very different is the solitary sand-piper! though why called so I am at a loss to conjecture. It, too, comes after all traces of winter are obliterated, but it does not tarry on the river-shore. It is especially fond of pools of rain-water in newly ploughed fields, and I have known it to stay about these until all the water had disappeared, when it would move to a grassy field through which ran a little brook. Here also the bird is happy, judging from its actions, though it utters no call or unpretentious song when undisturbed, or, if so, in so low and indistinct a tone as to have escaped me. Open glades surrounded by dense woods also attract it, and its flight-power is often beautifully exhibited in its upward, twisting progress between tall trees; and

then with what lightning-like rapidity it disappears ! but if you remain where you were when you flushed the bird, the chances are that you will see it return, darting down with a snipe-like whir of the wings, and the moment it touches the ground raising them until they meet over its back, as if to ascertain whether they are still in working order after such



Solitary Sand-piper.

violent exercise. It is a pretty act and an invariable one. Then it commences to feed. I once saw a pin-tail duck go through the same performance.

Though I appear to stand alone in the opinion, I am convinced that they sometimes breed here. There is no possibility of confounding this species with any other ; the suggestion of a professional

bird-man that I mistook a "teeter's" nest for that of a solitary sand-piper is absurd. Let me add that I once shot a female "solitary" and found in it an egg with the shell well advanced, and it is ridiculous to suppose that such an egg could have been carried to the Arctic circle for depositing; nor shall I ever forget the distress caused to its mate by my act. That pair of birds, which had been staying about the mucky meadow for a week or more, intended to nest as near as the mountains of Pennsylvania, to which they could have flown in half a day; and, to my certain knowledge, a pair of solitary sand-pipers once had their nest near a spring in the old White Horse woods.

In the upland plover—which, by the way, is not a plover, but a sand-piper—we have an entertaining inland species which practically deserted this neighborhood forty years ago, although previous to that time it was very abundant, particularly in August, when the birds that had been bred in the higher, rolling Pennsylvania grass fields collected here previous to their autumnal migratorial flight.

Across the river, and not far away either, these birds may be seen during the entire summer, and if they are always as attractive as I once found them among the Lehigh hills, I have excellent reason to be envious. The prosy exploration of an old Indian jasper quarry was being most perfunctorily done, when I heard the soft, pleading whistle of a grass plover, and I spent half that morning trying to discover the bird. The ground here was thickly

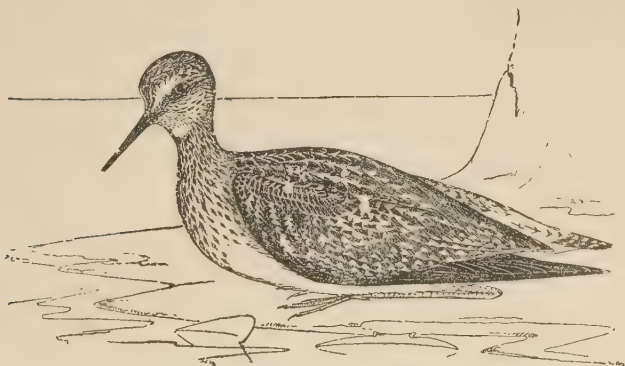
strewn with broken masses of parti-colored jasper with thrifty grass growing between them. Not having seen these birds in numbers for some time, I laid my archæology aside, as I do upon every pretext, and went plover-hunting. Up hill and down dale I followed that persuasive whistle, but not until the afternoon was well advanced did I have a chance to plainly see the birds. It was not, as I at first supposed, the call of one bird that I had heard, but of many; and after I found my way back to camp, I learned that these plovers were abundant in every direction. Through the day they had eluded me, but they did not later, and I often saw them running over bare ground or perched on the top rail of a fence or on a stone wall, but never in a tree. Towards the cool of the evening they would come boldly out, and, while not noisy, whistled now and then. There is a peculiarity about their call that is not easily described. It is as hollow, un-bird-like, and weird as the far-away hooting of an owl; yet it is musical and one does not tire of it. As I sat by my camp-fire, smoking, this call brought up a somewhat sobering train of thought, yet not an unpleasant one. As the night wore on and the light of the camp grew brighter, the plovers retired as if frightened by the unusual sight, and I did not hear them again until towards the "wee sma'" hours, when the fire was dead, my associates asleep, and through the canvas of our tent came the mournful plaint of the little red owl and what I took to be the whistle of these same up-land birds passing by, but far overhead. At this

Upland Plover.



time the sound was even more unlike the ordinary cries or calls of birds than in the early evening, and was calculated to cause the superstitious to weave strange stories of ghost-like visitations.

At home I have often heard these plovers' tremulous notes, charged with superabundant sweetness, when the birds were on their way to other lands. Heard them, but they were so far in cloud-land that I never saw them.



Yellow-legged Tattler.

According to my experience with the feathered folk about where I live, the yellow-leg is pre-eminently a song-bird. The time when I eagerly pursued it along the river-shore and brought it down to the mud-flats by cunning imitation of its call has gone by, but as long as life remains I will never tire of watching it about the ponds, nor forego the pleasure of listening to its flute-like whistle as it passes to and fro between the river and the meadows.

These river-shore birds come early in the spring, but do not tarry, and not until late in July and throughout August do they become prominent. Then the long mud-flats that are exposed at low tide offer them excellent feeding-grounds, and during the early morning they are often very numerous and noisy; but knowing to what dangers they are exposed, they soon take refuge in the tall grass, the wild rice, or wherever there is shelter, and the chances are that you will see but little of them. Above tide-water their tactics change, and they will effectually hide themselves among stones on the little islands in the river. I have known them to squat among pebbles and remain motionless until I was well away, when they would sail off and be quickly out of reach; but I always knew of their going, though my back was turned, as their mellow, flute-like whistle—*phēē-ōōn*, a dozen times repeated—was unmistakable and ever loud enough to be heard above the roar of the water as it hurried over its rocky bed. When you have once learned this note it is never forgotten; and I doubt if you can hear it, or a successful imitation, without calling up some pretty view of land and water, shade and sunshine, with a line of yellow-legs flitting across the summer sky.

During the summer of 1895 there was a protracted and disastrous drought. The near-by mill-pond was shrunken to a mere pool and the shallow head-waters failed to cover the long, narrow mud-bank, above which protruded the trunks of trees felled nearly a

century ago. One spring on the pond's bank still maintained its flow and sent a little trickling stream across the mud, into which it wore a narrow, tortuous channel. It was a sad, forlorn, forsaken-looking place, and yet for nearly a month it was inviting above all else in the neighborhood by reason of the birds attracted to it. Among these was a yellow-leg that became quite tame and allowed of such near approach that I could study its movements to great advantage. It was never in a hurry, yet on occasion could run with great rapidity ; it was never desirous of flying, yet had unrestricted use of its wings. It was seldom silent, and even when hunting the mud-flats, probing the soft ground almost every moment, it would indulge in that pleasant whistling so familiar to those who have rambled along our river-shore in the early mornings of late summer days. For many days I feasted my ears on the music and my eyes on the graceful ways of this "game"-bird, which was too near and dear to me, at least, to ever think of its destruction.

It remained until the early autumn rains brought the pond up to its proper level, and even then appeared loath to depart, for I saw it on the narrow beach between the dense shrubbery and the deep water while passing in my boat one morning early in October. It seemed at that time to have suddenly grown wild again, and, whistling with unusual vigor, it finally rose high in the air and directed its flight towards the river. I watched it until a mere speck in the western sky, and when lost to view I

felt that I was saying good-by forever to a valued friend.

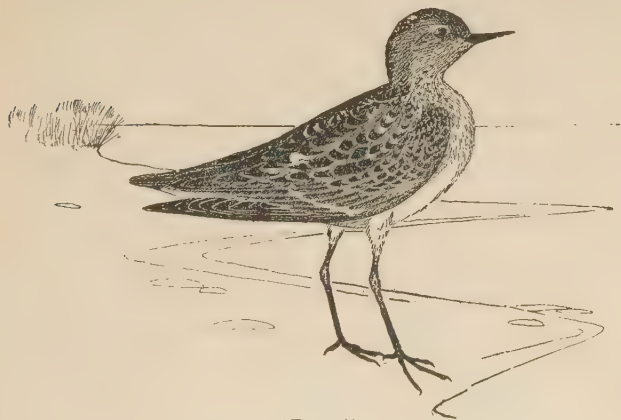
A day on Duck Island,—a September day when there is the suggestiveness of decay over all the uplands ; almost a funereal outlook ; for the summer, though not dead, is slowly dying. However, there is, as yet, but little evidence of this on the island shores. The tides have kept the herbage green, and there is no lack of glitter along the little ridges



Sanderling.

where the currents have heaped the sand into curiously curved lines. The scattered relics of the last great freshet—branches of old trees torn from the mountain-side—still hold their places, and about each is a little pool that steadily grows less with the ebbing and is refilled again by the returning tide before it has wasted quite away. Here, when the island is abandoned by all after the fishermen have dried their nets for the season, I am wont to

seek a comfortable seat and watch the ever-shifting scenes, and am only disappointed when the sandy reaches next the water's edge are not made brighter by the fairest, the liveliest, and, I fancy, the most intelligent of all our wading birds, the piping plovers, sanderlings, and "peeps." Everywhere I see examples of big brains in little bodies; and just as the ant is far ahead of the beetle and the gaudy



"Peep."

butterfly, so, it appears to me, these little beach birds are quicker-witted than the curlews, godwits, and bull-heads, those larger representatives of these groups. This is not a matter of the slightest importance, however. The fact that "peeps" and plovers are here at times, and that I can see them, alone concerns me. They are birds that leave music behind them in the trackless air as surely as their little footprints can be traced in the sand over which

they run, and this is all-sufficient merit. "Peeps" and plovers ! There is music in the very names.

Through the thick, steamy air above the river we catch the flashing of white light that comes and goes, —now near, now far ; and then, when we seem to have lost it altogether, it again breaks suddenly upon us, and a flock of wee, winsome birds, moving with the precision of an army, alights upon the sand. Instantly the birds break ranks and each whistles its gladness to be free. They are piping plovers, and never have birds piped their happiness more plainly. They seem to be forever on the run when not on the wing, and the abruptness with which they can turn a corner is realized when we follow the course of their footprints. No matter how rapidly they may be going, they detect the slightest movements of grains of sand, and knowing that something good to eat is beneath, they probe for and swallow the morsels, large or small, while still running, apparently at random. They flush hundreds of spotted tiger-beetles that go whizzing off in a direct course, and I have often wondered if the plovers overtook them. If so, their speed as pedestrians is wonderful ; and when their throats are clear they whistle. This consists of one or two clear notes with many variations, yet all readily ascribable to the same bird, whether one sees it or not. It is distinctly a watery, river-side sound that is wholly unlike the song of any inland bird,—that is, we have so long associated it with the sea-coast and the wilder reaches of our river-shores that it has grown to be as familiar as the breaking of

the waves upon the beach : the spirit, as it were, of the plover's haunts expressed in music. Nuttall has attempted to describe this bird's most marked cries as *pee-voo—pai-voo*, but no words can give an adequate idea of the strange, almost sad, faint echo that remains with us when a number of these birds, dashing away in fright, give utterance to their forebodings. It is as wild, as lonely, as unearthly as the wailing of the wind through the rigging of a storm-tossed ship. And yet, in this river-valley, sweeter music is seldom heard ; music to which we more willingly listen or more sincerely regret when the last flock of the season passes southward for the winter.

The plovers usually find that the island is not a forsaken feeding-ground when they come here from up or down the river. There is generally some wading bird or other ahead of them,—a sanderling, it may be, or half a dozen of them, or a killdeer, and often a great flock of little sand-pipers, or "peeps" as they are frequently called. The sanderlings are never numerous, and usually accompany flocks of other birds, but, like an occasional phalarope swimming off shore,—a much rarer bird,—it is sometimes alone. I well remember the last time I saw these birds. It was on a cool, windy September morning, with a dash of frost in the air. The sparkle of the river was too bright for one to look directly at it, and I shaded my eyes as I walked down the west shore of the island. Suddenly I heard the notes of some beach birds, and, looking up, saw half a dozen of them coming towards me.

I squatted on the sand, and my old gray suit that years ago lost all semblance to newness well disguised me. I did not move a muscle. To the birds I was no more than a stump or a bunch of grass. They settled within a few feet of me, and, standing still, looked intently at the river. Were they thinking that it was time to migrate? The birds were sanderlings.

I have been surprised to find how far inland the little sand-pipers or "peeps" come at times, both in spring and autumn, though they are recorded by Warren as found about ponds and small streams in all parts of Pennsylvania. I have always associated them with the main watercourses and the sea-shore, and particularly, in my own neighborhood, with the Delaware River's immediate shores, and was, till lately, under the impression that they were not due until August. In April, 1892, I journeyed in a wagon into Lehigh County, Pennsylvania, and, although there was but the vaguest promise of spring-like weather, was rash enough to sleep on the ground in a tent. The ostensible purpose was archæology, which, however, I let my companion look after. I was interested in the ornithological features of the season, and although for some purposes a month too late, I was convinced that we have in these hills a country more visited by northern birds, in winter, than is generally believed. But the sand-pipers! I was up rather early on the morning of the 23d, and going to the brook near camp,—a stream some ten feet wide, rapid and shallow,—I

was surprised to find many "peeps" in the grass and along the banks of the creek. They were extremely active, rather wild, and appeared to obey the warning calls of a pair of killdeers that screamed and screeched and were altogether rude and boisterous, particularly when, stooping to wash my face, I slipped and fell headlong into the water. Perhaps they were frightened, but I fancied that they were jeering me, and my temper was not improved. After I had regained my equilibrium and was otherwise ready for an outing, I went to look for the "peeps," and found them feeding on little islands in this creek. They would not permit a very near approach, but my field-glass solved the question of their identity. The next day there was a moderate amount of sunshine, and my companion and myself wandered several miles from camp, at one place climbing a high hill, where we tarried for some time enjoying the scenery, which was beautiful. Hills rose above hills, and at our feet lay a wide valley rich with warm colors, while the monotone of the wind as it passed through the leafless trees was seldom broken, save by a song-sparrow or the wild cry of a wary hawk. While seated on a huge projecting mass of rock in the middle of a green pasture, there came a shadow and a sound that stopped our conversation. Looking up, we saw a flock of "peeps" just above our heads, and, though it may have been but fancy on my part, they seemed to look down as inquiringly at us as we did after them until lost in the distance.

The "peeps" on Duck Island are always entertaining. They have less musical ability than piping plovers, but are by no means mute ; and when they wander from the water's edge and run like mice through the grass, their single note much resembles the squeaking of that animal, but louder. They are fond of very small fish, which they often find in the little pools left by the outgoing tide ; but these birds show to most advantage when they keep together ; when they feed, as a close-ranked company, on the sands bared by wane of tide ; or when, taking alarm, they rise in the air as one bird and move here, there, backward and forward, urged by a common impulse, until beyond the reach of unaided vision,—now a streak of shining, snow-white light, now but a dark line on the horizon.

A word more concerning the wading birds of the upper Delaware. The increase of population, the deforesting of countless acres of land, the defilement of the river water, the greed of brutes yclept sportsmen, and the building of houses close to the shore, to say nothing of steamboats and river-craft of every sort, have necessarily resulted in great changes in our avi-fauna. It is strange that any bird will run the gauntlet of a dozen towns to find a bit of wild river-shore. We have, besides these that I have mentioned, other water-birds, but nowhere and at no time are they abundant, save when a violent storm temporarily stays their migratorial progress ; yet there was a time when very many of our larger sand-pipers and other birds, now con-

fined to the sea-coast, wandered up the river to the head of its tidal flow. Earlier books concerning this region make mention of this, but the all-convincing evidence comes from another source. Recent explorations of village sites of the one-time Delaware Indians have disclosed the fact that curlews and all the larger species once penetrated this far inland and found congenial homes where at present they are never seen ; and with them came many a swimming bird that now seldom leaves the bay. In the ashes of camp-fires that have been cold for centuries are still preserved unmistakable evidences of the presence in Indian times of many a wild bird that, wandering along the river-shore, or venturing up the valleys of the larger creeks, gave to this country—now almost desolate at times—a charm that the rambler seeks in vain while strolling along the sandy beach of Duck Island, where runs the tide.



CHAPTER IX.

A FEW FEATHERED FIENDS.

WHEN I showed one of the illustrations of this chapter to a friend, she remarked, "What a fiend!" and as I recall all the hawks and owls that I have seen, it is a question whether they are not all more or less fiendish. Admitting this, it does not take from them any of their attractiveness; on the contrary, we are perhaps even drawn towards them because of it. Cruelty and all the qualities that we desire eliminated from human nature are secretly, if not openly, admired when exhibited by the lower orders of creation.

Birds of prey are features of the winter landscape. Not that they are absent at other seasons; but with the trees in full foliage, and the summer birds about, and every field, wood, and meadow packed with fruit and flowers, they are inconspicuous in comparison with the days of snow-clad fields, bare trees, and open meadows,—brown where the snow has melted and glittering as glass where ice has formed. At such a time not a rough-legged or sharp-shinned

hawk can move without detection, and its telltale shadow not only gives us timely warning, but also many a timid mouse and merry sparrow. As a matter of fact, too, hawks are really much more abundant at this season, and probably this is equally true of owls.

Hawks are cowards ; they are crafty ; with all their beauty and skilful flight and aerial evolutions, they never risk themselves ; they do not prey on creatures that can resist them. In these respects they bear a strong resemblance to common types of humanity ; their meanness is a well-focussed photograph of people to be met with everywhere. Did hawks merely kill that they themselves might live, we could be more tolerant ; but with what fiendish pleasure will they dash through a flock of sparrows, perhaps maiming one and putting all in abject terror ! Is there not everything that is despicable in the shrill scream of a hawk after it has caused the poor sparrows to dash like frightened sheep along the weedy way, or when, coming suddenly upon the tuneful white-throats, as they mourn amidst the ruins of a dead summer, it disturbs their meditations ?

It is as easy to catalogue their sins as to pick out the flaws in your neighbors, but in either case it is an absurd exhibition of self-righteousness to do so. Hawks eat the pretty warblers, and these warblers eat insects far more beautiful than themselves, and these, again, or some of them, prey on still smaller ones. It is but a long chain of destruction, and man need not set himself up as one whit better than

the ignoble hawk or skulking owl that grabs the young birds from their nest in spite of the parents' protest. Both hawks and owls show their true characters with no attempt at deception, and could, if we would but learn, teach us more than one lesson worth remembering.

I like the birds of prey. It is easy to be blind to what one does not approve of and accept the rest. It shows deplorable weakness not to be able to do this. It is necessary in other matters of much more importance, so why not practise it in this phase of out-door ornithology? As hunters of mice, for instance (nobody cares for a mouse), let us observe the hawks, and in that capacity greet with pleasure all that cross our path, be they large or small.

I have said that hawks are winter birds, but have qualified the statement. Almost the first to appear in any number, not only in the marshes, but also in the pasture meadows and upland fields, is the beautiful harrier. It is well named, for no other bird more effectually harries the small birds of the bushes or is more active in driving to the fastnesses of the covered runways the abundant meadow-mice. Nor does it usually merely frighten birds and mammals, for this hawk has a quick eye and a sure grip, and if there is game to be had, it never goes hungry. There is nothing particularly graceful in the bird's movements as compared with other hawks. Indeed, it often flaps its wings as if flying were tiresome, and ordinarily does not indulge in aerial gymnastics. It is principally because these hawks are large,

conspicuously colored, and fly near the ground that we observe them so closely. When, in early autumn, as we are thinking of other things or perhaps enjoying the antics of sparrows on the fence-posts,



Harrier.

this hawk, with wide-spreading wings noisily flapping, rises from the grass, its mere size proves such a novelty that we forget old-time favorites; and again, the bird suggests wildness and every other condition foreign to our tame summers. This big-

ness in birds counts for a great deal with the rambler. It pleases us as does the first glimpse of the mountains after a long journey over the plains. We are ever on the lookout for it, whatever the time of year, whether in the meadows or along the creek. No matter how abundant the smaller birds may be, we are always delighted to see a great blue heron, the less graceful night-heron, or even a homely bittern. They may merely fly away as we approach, but they are big, and that is enough.

The harrier has no favorite haunts here during its winter sojourn. Years ago, when the meadows were less a thoroughfare than now, and had not lost so much of their original wildness, these hawks were residents, but of late they do not appear until the reed-birds begin to gather in the marshes preparatory to their south-bound migratory flight. At this time they are on the watch for birds crippled by the gunners, and would be far more common, I believe, but for the infamous practice of the bird-butchers, who shoot at **them** on every occasion.

When, as often happens, the winter passes without snow, the upland fields afford the harriers excellent hunting-grounds. Every fourth or fifth adjoining field has its bird, and I have noticed during the present winter—1895-96—how much they hunt on foot. I have never associated hawks with pedestrianism, but I can see some reason for it in this case, as their prey (the mice) are extraordinarily abundant,—a positive curse that has arisen through the stupidity of the farmers, and it serves them right. Of

all hopeless specimens of humanity, an obstinate, ignorant farmer takes the lead. By the aid of a field-glass I could easily follow the movements of a harrier as it was walking about a level field. At such a time this hawk is anything but graceful, the walk often breaking into a series of hops, and sometimes what might be called a flying jump, the bird expanding its wings and going forward three or four feet and sometimes as many yards. This particular bird quartered the ground very well, going to and fro, or from side to side, like a well-trained setter after quails. After much crawling and exercise of patience, I once surprised a harrier in the act of tearing the frozen roof from a mouse's burrow. When it discovered me it cackled somewhat after the manner of a guinea-fowl, and flew off with a rapid movement unlike its ordinary flight. If these hawks worked in concert when ground-hunting, they could do their work much more effectively, but I have never seen them associated. The beautiful blue-gray males—the old birds—occasionally appear in March, at which time their greater activity, more conspicuous coloring, and suppressed kitten-like cry make them a prominent feature of the landscape.

It may be supposed from the little I have said of this mild-mannered mouse-hunter that it is a long remove from the so-called "noble" falcon, and so it is; but if you muffle the jaws of a steel trap and capture one without doing it an injury, and then study it at close quarters, you will find spirit enough

to meet all your ideas as to nobility among birds. Its loss of liberty arouses every dormant element of its nature, and it will assert itself very forcibly if opportunity offers. This bird resents any approach to familiarity, and woe betide you if its sharp talons are fixed in your hand. That it is courageous has been often demonstrated. I speak from experience. Nuttall says that the young are readily tamed.

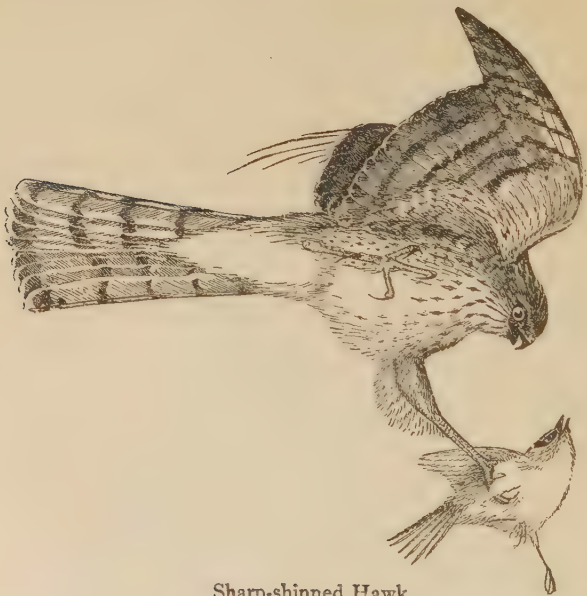
It would be of interest to know whether, in addition to the guttural *kek-kek*, like the chatter of a king-rail, which all large hawks utter when surprised or wounded, the harriers and other species of equal size have a series of cries, alarm-notes, signals, and low-toned coaxings, such as are characteristic of other birds. We know that the crow has a considerable vocabulary ; but in winter, with the exception of the red-tail, which is often very noisy, our hawks do not seem to express their emotions by voice as well as by action, though I suspect that at times they mutter a good deal to themselves and to one another. On several occasions I have heard, or thought I did, sounds that I attributed to one of these harriers, as if talking to itself ; and, while concealed, have heard no end of strange mutterings from captive goshawks, winter falcons, and black hawks,—a low clicking sound, rapidly uttered and with extensive variations, somewhat like the chatter of a hen when she is said to “want to lay.” Considerable difficulty is experienced in determining points like these because of the untamability of

hawks when captured late in life ; under such circumstances the difference in their surroundings may tend to make them taciturn. If we could gain their confidence, we might possibly be able to see them in a new light. As it is, we have a comparatively tame species in the fish-hawks, and by lingering about their nests will very quickly discover that they are incessant "talkers."

As regards harriers, they are extremely cautious, if not very wild, birds, and probably not more than once in a winter will a closer view of them be had than that afforded by their zigzag flight over the fields. They can certainly do the harrying act to perfection. First one wing and then the other will be tipped downward until the top of the tall grass is lightly brushed and birds and mice hurry and skurry in every direction ; but the instant a victim is sighted there are exhibited a precision and an impetuosity that leave to those who love such traits nothing to be desired.

Materially reduce the size and vastly increase the activity and a correct idea is presented of that thoroughly murderous yet most attractive bird, the sharp-shinned hawk. Not a "noble" hawk according to the ideas of falconers in days gone by, but there never was a bird of prey that could do its particular work any better or with a less percentage of failure. I once saw a sharp-shinned hawk strike a barn-swallow, and was then fully satisfied of the absolute perfection of its peculiar powers. These small falcons leave their nesting-sites in the more

remote country and appear among us at the time of, or just before, the falling of the leaves and arrival of the tree-sparrows and blue snow-birds. Sometimes I find them on the south hill-side in October, when the leaves have been discolored by frost, and are brown, ruddy, or brightly red, but still thick-set



Sharp-shinned Hawk.

as in summer, and among them many Peabody-birds. It is not strange that these wandering hawks should discover such places, and what a disturbance is created when they dash by and carry off a victim ! How the other birds struggle to reach the greenbrier thickets, tumbling rather than flying, as though so

many cripples with their canes and crutches ! A lighting up of the woods or a generally enlarged outlook from any point of view puts the sharp-shinned hawk in excellent humor, if such a cruel creature be susceptible to any of the gentler emotions. As I pass along the gully on the first frosty morning, when the ground does not yield to the foot and the notes of the song-sparrow come rolling down the brook as frozen drops of music, I always expect to see a flash of "dark lightning" and to hear, perhaps, the "whistle !" of wings ; for the sharp-shinned hawk is ever prowling here, entering the ravine at its head and leaving it where it opens to the meadows.

These birds appear to have a deal of method in their apparent madness. Not long ago I noticed one perched on a post of a grape-trellis. I watched it for some time and found that it had designs upon some recently hatched chickens which were then closely huddled under their mother's wings. The bird was promptly driven off. The next day it returned at exactly the same time. I placed a steel trap on its perch, but this was recognized as such, or at any rate as something to be avoided, and it took its stand near by. It succeeded in getting only one of the young chickens, being twice, in my presence, completely baffled by the courageous and well-planned acts of the old hen.

These sharp-shinned hawks are wild, of course, like all their species, but they occasionally venture

very near our houses, particularly when we are pestered with English sparrows nesting at every possible coigne of vantage. So far as the sparrows are concerned, we welcome these hawks; but they are not always sufficiently discriminating, and I once saw one strike at a caged canary that had been placed at an open window. The fright killed the canary, and the hawk was seriously injured by violent contact with the wires of the cage, which were much bent. Does this and like incidents indicate defective vision? It is not unusual for this bird to dash with all its speed at tree-sparrows at the moment of their disappearance in a dense greenbrier thicket impenetrable to the hawk, and after such a rash endeavor the bird is often feather-torn to a degree that renders it almost helpless. Ordinarily we are apt to look upon the smaller birds of prey as perfect in mechanism and possessing excellent judgment, but close observation discloses the fact that there are limitations in the latter respect, and that failure is not an unknown quantity in their lives.

Cooper's hawk is nearly related to the preceding, but is a little larger. Its habits are said to be the same, but I have not found them so. It is about all summer, and also in April and May; during these months, however, it keeps out of sight, though near enough to the farmer's house to be posted as to the chicken-coops. It will hide within twenty yards of the kitchen door, in a cedar, and take a chicken at a certain hour day after day, until discovered by mere accident. The dash of the hawk, the commotion

among the fowls, the barking of old Towser,—all take place with regularity, but too rapidly for the young hunter who stands ready with his gun. These evidences of cunning and the constant circumvention of man's elaborate schemes for the hawk's destruction make delightful reading in the study of animal intelligence. There is no danger of chickens becoming extinct, so here's to the success of Cooper's hawk!

In little patches, growing where the soil is poor



Cooper's Hawk.

and sandy, there flourishes what I have always known as Indian grass. It becomes light straw color in early autumn, and, unless flattened by a heavy fall of snow, sways in the wind and stands upright, a little, frost-defying tropical jungle. Choosing, appropriately, on each occasion a typical Indian summer day, I have for years been in the habit of

creeping into the middle of one of the larger patches of this grass, stepping carefully so as to leave no track behind me, and, bending down sufficient of it for a mattress, would lie flat upon my back and look at the sky. I always took care to have sufficient standing grass to shield me, and more than once enjoyed lying very still while members of the family or some of the farm hands were passing by, wondering what had become of me. Those were days when rheumatism was not a bugbear, and at such times I loved, above all other bird adventures, to watch the circling red-tailed hawks that hour after hour wheeled round and round far overhead and occasionally sent earthward a wild scream that seemed like a message. *K'ee-āāh—k'ee-āāh!* A wild sound, if ever there was one; such a cry as an Indian or a panther at bay might be expected to utter, but which would never be attributed to a bird,—not even this bold hawk. Still, it is not so far-reaching as the screech or demoniac yell of a great horned or a barn-owl, which, however, is now but seldom heard.

This study of the birds above us never becomes monotonous. I have seen five red-tailed hawks circling at the same time and always keeping at about the same distance from one another. They described an inner and four outer circles, slightly overlapping. As if by mutual agreement, the birds would at times rise higher and higher, until they seemed but mere black dots in the light blue beyond; then for a moment they would appear to be motionless in mid-air, after which, as gradually as they as-

cended, the hawks would return, the circles growing wider and wider until I could see each bird distinctly and hear their wild laughter as they dallied with a passing cloud. Then other birds would often pass by. At any moment the sky might be streaked with crooked lines of ducks; migrating birds would pass at times,—mere moving dots that could scarcely be distinguished; and when some of the restless songsters of the bushes flew leisurely by, even stopping a second to look at me, I gained an insight into the bird-world as novel as it was entertaining. I have had song-sparrows and chickadees come so close to my grassy retreat that I could literally look them in the eyes, and not until I waved my arms about



Red-tailed Hawk.

did they realize what I really was. I have ventured here even as late as December, foolhardy as it was, and revelled in winter sunshine, one of the chief glories of our changing seasons. But what of the red-tails? They are not forever in the sky.

These hawks, which outnumber all the other large species, appear in abundance in time to greet the nut-dropping winds of October, and they stay with us until April. At least one pair may be found nesting near by and remaining all summer, but there is then too much to look after to be concerned about them, and they never seem to intrude upon our notice. While to be found if searched for, weeks may pass without our seeing or hearing them. How true this is of any one form of life! We may almost forget its existence until some specialist calls attention to it, and then we see little else until his influence has given place to more generalized considerations of wild life that, as a whole, concern us more nearly. The mere presence of a herpetologist lately filled the whole hill-side with salamanders, and I found then, as I had before, species *in*, and not merely *near*, water, which have been unwisely stated to be strictly terrestrial because the observer had only found them under such conditions. To formulate fixed rules limiting the actions or habitat of any wild creature is simply absurd. How could evolution operate if there really was such fixity of habit? As well say of a salamander that it will die if caught in the rain as assert that it is never seen in a brook.

In the depth of winter—one of the old-fashioned kind, with snow a foot deep and the earth and water alike one solid rock—the red-tails are often deprived of their daily allowance of mice, and then I have seen them seeking the shelter of the south hill-side,

where, with feathers all outstanding, they appeared to be almost twice their real size. At such a time they are apt to be stupid and easy of approach, which suggests that their senses have been dulled by hunger, and then they are not averse to a chicken diet, but full-grown hens can generally fight them off. Why do they always strike at them and not molest the roosters? Is this true? It is a common impression in my neighborhood and borne out by what I have noticed, which, however, is more likely to be mere coincidence than evidence.

The peak of a hay-stack is a favorite outlook with them when the ground is covered with snow and only bushes and fence-posts vary the landscape. I have seen one of these hawks dust away the snow with its wings and crouch down on the hay so as to be almost undistinguishable from it. Was this done for warmth? As every stack has a thriving colony of mice at its base, and as their tracks show that these creatures come out at times, may there not be a reason for the hawk's resting-place other than that it is comfortable?

There is another large hawk that is always a winter visitor, but which, my records show, some thirty years ago used to come earlier and stay later than it does now. Locally these birds are known as marsh-hawks, because on their arrival, as an old gunner told me, "they put for the meadows and gather the rail-birds that couldn't skip after the first frost," which information comprises a whole chapter of local ornithology in very few words. I have always

heard them called "feather-boots." Though the great contrast in the colors of its plumage, which vary from dirty white to black, is deceptive, and has seemed to many to indicate different species, there were practical observers in my early days who doubted this, and one old shooter, who was of an inquiring frame of mind, called my attention to a



Rough-legged Falcon.

row of nine nailed to his barn door, that well illustrated the gradations from approaching albinism to the most distinctly melanistic form. Of all its names, perhaps because the first that I heard given it, I prefer "feather-boots," and as such I shall always know it.

Though we read a good deal about the black hawk's sluggishness, its labored flight, and its "ignoble" ways in general, old "feather-

boots" is no fool, and when in full black, with no quills lost from its wings or tail,—the only attention that the bird receives at the hands of man is in the way of persecution by loafers,—it has a decidedly noble aspect; and given an open field, with a fair chance for the mouse, "feather-boots" will

show winged activity that is as creditable as it is necessary, for a frightened mouse is never a laggard, and can tax a hawk's ingenuity and skill by dodging, if not by a straight-away course.

The black hawk, or rough-legged falcon as it is called in the books, is strictly a "local" bird. I have known one to take position on a particular tree and apparently never wander any great distance from it, content, so to speak, with the mice that came its way (for these birds seem to feed upon nothing else) and letting all others go. As features of the winter landscape they are as valuable, if we want wild life represented, as the sportive snow-birds just outside our window, and are equally harmless. I well remember one of these hawks, of fullest black plumage,—it might have sat as the original of Wilson's illustration,—that I saw daily from my west windows for two whole months, and when the sun was setting, "feather-boots's" thoughtful pose, silhouetted against a crimson background, was a charming sight. At dusk it went the rounds of the meadow ditches a-mousing, I suppose, but was always back at its post in the early morning. More than many others I have seen, it was an owlish bird, but none the less, when it left us—shot by some "collector," perhaps—we all greatly missed it.

Though the black hawk may be slow, even when dinner is at stake, this trait cannot be imputed to our common, all-the-year-round, half tame and often playful sparrow-hawk. It is a wicked rascal, to be sure, when employed in killing birds, but it can turn

so quickly to the righteousness of mouse-murder that we do not think of the slaughtered song-sparrow, and clap our hands with delight when the gay little falcon hovers over the field or darts off, light of wing as any swallow, screaming *keety! keety! keety!* at the top of its voice. I never heard of one dashing at the bird on a silly woman's bonnet, but



Sparrow-hawk.

it is plucky and mischievous enough to do it, and more's the pity that this does not often happen, to the dismay of such women and the disgust of those who pay the bonnet bills.

There are plenty of hollows in the old apple-trees, and these are occupied by great-crested flycatchers, Carolina wrens, and even robins and an occasional

bluebird ; but the sparrow-hawk has knowledge of every available hollow in the scattered mid-field trees, and in one of these it lives all summer. Big brown grasshoppers—the “tobacco-spitters” of boyhood days—are usually large enough game for it during the warm weather, and it finds them as easily as turkeys do the big black crickets ; but it will sail leisurely over ploughed ground, such as a cornfield in May, and carry off food of many kinds, even to the little brown snake that it finds basking in the hot sun. I have seen it give chase to a chipmunk, and then there was a pretty exhibition of speed along the top rail of the old worm-fence ; but, until after two or three killing frosts, this little hawk depends largely upon insects, and afterwards, if the supply is sufficient, on mice. Although evidence of bird-murder is not usually found about its roomy nest in a hollow tree, still, the name sparrow-hawk is not misleading. Would that it were a matter of English sparrows exclusively. Then might we rejoice !

Owls among birds, like bats among mammals, have always attracted much attention, but, because of their nocturnal and crepuscular habits, are far from rightly understood. The owl, like the bat, figures extensively in general literature, and as a result, the popular mind has become familiarized with a creature very unlike the real bird, which is neither as nocturnal as is stated, as wise as is believed, nor as black as it is painted. Like all birds of prey, there is a repulsive side to its character,

but this is not always the one presented to us, nor indeed often the visible one, and the rambler who takes a quiet stroll in the fields at even-tide, or wanders farther away in the moonlight, will be afforded no end of entertainment from owls both large and small, if, happily, that pest in many a community, the taxidermist, has not exterminated these emi-



Long-eared Owl.

nently useful birds for the purpose of adorning bar-rooms and barber shops.

I have seen nine species of owls either on my farm or within easy walking distance of it; two of these—the snowy and the hawk-owl—but once, though the former have been frequently killed along our Jersey coast and inland. That I found the hawk-

owl years ago was proved by a careful comparison with Audubon's plate and description. Years afterwards a second specimen was sent from this neighborhood to Philadelphia to the late Mr. Cassin, who identified it. The barn-owl is a resident here and has been for many years ; the cat-owl, or long-eared owl, was common before the woods were cut off, the swamps cleared, and one pretty bit of country converted into a desert that needs the refuse of a large town to keep it tolerably green. The marsh-owl is a migratory bird, and has resided for years in the lower marsh meadows. The barred owl is a stranger rarely seen now, and only in late autumn and winter. The saw-whet owl is a winter visitor, but has been found in the back swamps, three miles from here, throughout the year,—a southern colony of a northern bird. The great horned owl has been almost entirely driven off by the reckless deforesting of the country. A few still come and go during the winter, but at every opportunity are shot by some farmer that his name may appear in the local paper.

When the meadows were as wild as they are now tame there was a colony of marsh-owls that stayed in one rather circumscribed area and shaped their habits in accordance with their surroundings. They nested, for instance, not on the ground, but in the cavernous hollows of the old pollards and scattered sycamores. This was done to avoid the destruction of their eggs or young, for the tides varied, and light freshets frequently followed unusually heavy or protracted rains. In other words, they saw fit to stay

in one place all the year, and thereby showed their sense. Besides these there was the irregularly annual flight of those owls that appeared not only in this trackless wilderness of wild rice, bulrushes, and quicksands, but in all the surrounding country.

It may be presumed, from the fact that it often



Saw-whet Owl.

pounces on a mouse long before sunset, and also from the manner of its flight when flushed, that the marsh-owl can see pretty well by daylight; but it does not like being disturbed during the day, and will skulk like a wounded bird rather than leave the grass. One that I long held in captivity usu-

Barred Owl.



ally stood in a corner of the room with its face to the wall, but if forced away, would sprawl on the floor and extend its wings, as if trying to conceal itself by blending with the colors of the carpet, and similar tactics are no doubt adopted by the wild bird, for in localities where we are positive that they are plentiful it is at times impossible to find them ; yet later, in the gloaming, they suddenly appear, and fly to and fro, bat-like, over the very ground that had been previously carefully examined. Usually, in the marshes, they fly just above the vegetation, but in such a quiet and erratic way that one can scarcely distinguish them. In winter, particularly, they frequent the upland fields, and it is rather startling, while walking across lots after sunset, to have one of these birds flap its broad wings directly in front of you and then go bouncing off in an absurd way ; one moment lost to view, when near the ground, and then looming up larger than life as it flies between you and the faint, flickering light of the sunset sky.

Barred owls were common enough in the days of our grandfathers, but the encroachments of towns and the cutting up of farms into truck patches have caused these, like all the larger and more conspicuous birds, to withdraw into wilder regions. Yet they do appear at times. Following the river, they have nature beneath them as they fly, and avoid towns by taking zigzag courses. Here and there, principally along our creeks, a few sad remnants of primitive glory still remain, and amid these they

linger for a few days. Their ordinary food is likely to be scarce, especially in midwinter, and consequently the poultry yards are raided. This, of course, results in an early termination of the barred owl's career. This bird and the barn-owl are both locally known as monkey owls, and many a wonderful statement concerning "owlology," which the old hunters, who know better, never take the trouble to correct, gets into our village newspapers. Too often the resemblance to a monkey is more apparent in the teller of these strange stories than in the bird that gives rise to them.

I have already mentioned the saw-whet owl as being a resident bird ; at least it was ten years ago, if not so still. They have been found breeding in Eastern Pennsylvania, and, unless I am very much mistaken, I saw one flying across a narrow ravine in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, in September, 1892. This species is said to be nocturnal in its habits, but here let me quote Mr. Cram on this point. He writes, "As to the saw-whet owls, they are fairly common about here [Southern New Hampshire] and I hear them frequently in the spring. The one this illustration was made from was perched on a limb in broad sunlight, and had a partly eaten short-tailed shrew beside him. This was about the middle of the afternoon, and from all appearances the shrew had not been killed longer ago than that morning ; so I think these birds must occasionally hunt by daylight. My own experience agrees with what a hunter and trapper told me, that he has seen them

dash into a flock of redpolls with as much vigor and success as a sparrow-hawk. Sometimes, in summer, when the young are learning to fly, they seem to be everywhere during the evening, and fly about one's head as fearlessly as bats."

I have been introduced to people who did not like the little red owls, and I did not care to continue the acquaintance. I have known farmers who have had these birds shot, and as a result have suf-



Screech-owl.

fered loss of crops through the devastation of superabundant mice. I wish they had gone to the poor-house. The little red owl is cunning, I am glad to say, and often ventures into the very midst of a town,—strange fancy!—hiding by day on a house-top, but what it finds to eat at night is a question. Not house-top tabbies, more's the pity, and I fear the dove-cots are visited. In this consists the so-called

fiendish side of the little screech-owl, which cannot be concealed in the town owl; but its respectable cousins in the country are content with mice, and therein lies their safety. The melancholy cry of this bird is so refined that it scarcely rouses a sad thought in us, and I ask no better prelude to retrospection.

The iteration of the leaf-cricket on an August evening, the cry of toads at night in early summer, and the gentle, half-complaining *whoo-oo-o*, now so low as to be scarcely audible, and then rising to peevish fretfulness,—these sounds bring up visions of days gone by when the world about me was more of a mystery and therefore to my eyes far more beautiful than now. Not a creature then but was, in my imagination, invested with qualities that I have since found it does not possess. Every little owl then was as an eagle and the easy master of venturesome small boys.

Here in New Jersey the snowy owl is but a rare winter visitor, and were it not for its beautiful plumage and great size, would not attract much attention. It has, when here, no marked characteristics that make it essentially different from other owls, except, of course, that it is a “day” bird.

Under date of December 14, 1895, Mr. Cram writes, “The other day, as I stood in the door, looking north, I saw an Arctic owl flying steadily along over the meadows. As seen against the dark pine woods it appeared perfectly white. It alighted for a moment, first in one great elm and then another,

and then, flying northward, disappeared among the pines. I generally see them on dark, cloudy days before a snow-storm, but remember one brilliantly clear day after a storm in March, when a dozen or more passed over, scattering along at no great distance from each other, some within fifty yards of the ground and others up perhaps an eighth of a mile. In that bright sunlight, against the dark-blue sky, they were beautiful beyond anything I remember seeing. . . . On one occasion I was riding along a back road, when a snowy owl that seemed to have been eating something in the bushes, started up and, flying about our heads, actually threatened us with its claws."

Mr. Cram adds that the taxidermists offer so high a price for these birds that gunners make a business of shooting them, and, as a consequence, they are now scarce. There will be deep regret in the future when the landscape is robbed of all its wilder phases of bird-life and the imagination called upon to supply the weird cries that are still heard, but only



Horned Owl.

as we wander farther and farther away from a civilization whose demerit is an utter disregard of the claims that wild life has upon the world. A caged specimen at the Zoo is a poor substitute for the superb snowy owl that occasionally brightens a winter landscape.



CHAPTER X.

WITH THE WINTER BIRDS.

“SEE them there?” remarked Miles Overfield, as he pointed eastward and skyward, while we were standing by the sole remaining traces of the original forest, three enormous beeches.

“See what?” I asked.

“Them dark streaks, lookin’ as if somebody had scratched the sky with a sharp stick.”

“Yes, I see them. What of it?” I asked.

“You said you were goin’ on a tramp to-morrow. If you do, you’ll wade through a snow-storm.”

And so it proved. Occasionally we do find a man who is weather-wise. The night long, fine feathery flakes fell silently about the house and filled the garden-path. Over the fence the lesser landmarks were blotted out, but the runways of the meadow-mice were ridged and prominent, and an old birds’-nest, now tenanted by the vesper mouse, was as Arctic in appearance as an Eskimo’s home. Tufted grasses that had yielded but their greenness to the frost were builded yet a little higher with

tapering crystal spires. Crowding as they did the uneven fields and jostling each other in their downward rush, the snow-flakes made no sound. The dry, unyielding leaves bent to the burdens laid upon them, but there was no snapping of the stems. The trees along the headlands were being clothed anew, but as silently as the leaf-buds break their bonds in May. The brown, frost-bitten landscape of yesterday was a thing of the past, when, before the sun rose in the clouded east, I ventured out of doors.

The old man's prediction was already verified, but, not content with the steady storming through a long winter's night, the snow was still making good what Miles Overfield had said. Not only was I to wade through fallen snow, but the air was still murky with the falling flakes. Miles's words had been. "You'll wade through a snow-storm." The smoke was curling from his chimney-top as I passed, and perhaps he was muttering, if he saw me, "I told him so." Miles was a man to make you believe in witchcraft.

It is well that the world is not forever naked. For many a month there had been the bare fields, the leafy and now open woods, the grassy meadows, and the weedy pastures. Now for a change! The ruins of a riotous summer were mantled, and it was as a new world. An uncertain foothold is not conducive to serenity of temper, but the rambler who is disturbed by such small matters should let his more venturesome brother break a path for him. I was not to walk to-day, but to wade. I made no com-

plaint. The rugged oaks, with deeply wrinkled bark and huge outstretching arms, laughed at the storm. It was beneath them that I heard the first sound: a mere creaking of branches, it is true, but it was as if the trees were making merry. A slight swaying of uplifted branches, and the flakes were scattered, and little heaps that had gathered in the tree-tops



Chickadee.

came tumbling about me. Then a merry sound indeed began ringing through the woods. Snow-birds and chickadees came trooping by me, and with boundless curiosity stopped and chirped and wondered. The storm had no terrors for them, and never a thought of shelter entered their heads. I clapped my hands, and the hollow sound sent them,

not deeper into the forest, but directly overhead. As I followed their flight, I saw why they had sought the open country : the clouds were breaking, and, while I looked, the sunshine broke over the woods, rushed up the old wood-road, and met me half-way under the old oaks. What a superb sight ! A flood of sunshine was on the untrodden snow. The wreathed branches of the little cedars, the sinuous growth of greenbrier and bittersweet, muffled in ermine, and sunshine, merry as a May day, glittering over all.

What of wild life at such a time ? Would the birds come back ? Would the timid rabbit venture abroad, or the sly weasel dart by me ? There ought to be so much life, in days like these ; but this is no unhunted country. Shut in by a snow-storm, it seems a wilderness ; but the crowing cock is hard by, and the watch-dog's bark reaches its outermost bounds. No mouse, even, may show itself, but the mice are here ; no mink may clamber to the snow's surface, but his home is in the hill-side, and I can wait. Here come the birds again, a dozen noisy blue-jays. How well they suit the landscape !

What, is the jay more precious than the lark,
Because his feathers are more beautiful ?

This has been asked, and I give the unexpected answer, " Yes, by far." Neither jay nor lark is much by itself ; put either in a cage, and you will find this true enough. Their value is in proportion to their being in place, and no languid lay of a lark would

chord with the wild wintriness of the wood. The jays blended well with the gray beech-trees, although their bright feathers were as blue as the unclouded sky above them. The tree-tops creaked where branches crossed, giving a harsh sound for other days, but a wholesome one for a day like this ; and such, too, was the cry of the jay. The lisping tit-



Blue-jay.

mice were trivial just now, and belonged to sunny nooks where lingered bits of green and perhaps a dandelion ; but how grandly the jay's bold cry rang through the wood ! It is not wholly a harsh sound. There is a trace of smoothness now and then, almost a flute-like tone, and the cry, as a whole, I translated

"glorious, glorious." It matters nothing how far-fetched are these translations of bird-notes. It is a pleasing whim of all our out-door men that leads to no misconceptions in scientific ornithology.

As the shadows shortened and the day grew brighter, there were other loud-singing birds that took the places left by the restless jays; and to realize what our winter birds are, one must hear two of them, at least,—the crested tit and the Carolina wren. Both birds are small, both inconspicuously colored, but when I add that of a bright, clear winter morning their cheery whistle may be heard half a mile away, you will understand what these little songsters really are. They are resident birds, and there is not a day in the whole year when you may not hear them. The weather is never so depressing that the wren has no heart to call to its mate, and even a November sleet will not quiet the tit, albeit it has to take shelter while it sings. Above the songs at sunrise, on a bonny June day, I have heard them, but at no time is their singing so full of meaning as now in midwinter. It can call us out even from before an open fire and tempt us to an outing rather than continue with our back-log studies. In short, no winter day can be gloomy when we have these birds about us.

Yet another delightful feature of a day like this is that of the sudden appearance of birds. Where they were during the storm is a matter of doubt. Some will say, roosting in the cedars, or in hollow trees, or in any sheltered spot. This is plausible, but you seldom find the birds when you go to these

places. To-day, while, all unmindful of the cold, I stood listening to the wren and tit, the white-throated sparrows came by, and a huge flock of tree-sparrows, and the chickadees, and nuthatches. Now a dozen or more birds were in sight, and almost in reach. They had had no food for a day at least, yet were not downhearted, judging by their merry twitterings. That great snow-storms are destructive to our larger birds, as the crows, and even to robins and black-birds, is known, and how it happens that they do not at such times fly beyond the storm's area is not readily explained; but the small seed-eating birds fare pretty well, judging from appearances. There was a lively little kinglet to-day, the only one I saw, that peeped into every uncovered cranny of the bark of an old oak, and once, I know, pulled something out which it swallowed. The tall weeds that now were bent with snow would soon stand upright again, and then the seeds that still were held intact would be found by the busy sparrows. As to the white-throats, or Peabody-birds, they always seemed too lazy to eat.

There is a bit of comedy at the conclusion of a snow-storm that had best be witnessed from a safe distance. This is the slipping of the heaps that have been lodging on the branches. They drove me into the open meadow. Snow-flakes are trifles, even when very abundant, but snow-masses have to be seriously considered. A blinding avalanche that carries away your hat and fills your eyes and ears makes others laugh, but you fail to appreciate the

fun. I hurried to the open ground, and found a broad ditch that must be crossed. By chance a bared spot showed me where to pass, and it was a piece of great good fortune that I had chosen the path I did. A bubbling spring here had defied all the efforts of frost to hide it, and looking down into the blue-black waters I found a little world as active as ever in midsummer. Green grasses waved, swaying gently to and fro, as the June breezes bend the growing grain, and a few hardy fishes were astir. From the depths of the pool, disturbed by the long staff I carried, a spotted frog peeped out. Here, then, was variety. Typical winter in every direction, looking off; summer in all its glory, looking down. Many such spring pools are scenes of active life the winter long, but only the hunter and the fisherman know about them. One old man, a turtle-hunter, led me, years ago, to such a pool as this, and pointed out how even the larger fish often took refuge in them and that here he had sometimes found the largest snappers that he ever caught,—verifying this by capturing that very day as large and fierce a turtle as I have ever seen. It would fill a volume to write fully of a spring-pond in winter. It is one of Nature's hot-houses, that has an unvarying temperature, and so a supply of life that would go far to populate the region did some catastrophe kill all other life.

And here, while basking in the winter sunshine, let me repeat the legend of King Turtle as I heard it from this old man of the meadows, the last of our

turtle-hunters, old Asa Thornbush. I happened to find him sitting in a sheltered nook, dreaming the morning hours away in the delightfully warm winter sunshine. As I approached he looked up, nodded, and then looked away, over the broad expanse of lowlands and the shining river that sparkled as it hurried by its well-wooded shores. Although I was unnoticed beyond the most formal recognition, I sat down near him without breaking the silence for a few moments, and then ventured to ask him of what he was thinking.

"Of other times than these, lad, when the country wasn't so worn out," he replied, and continuing, after a brief pause, "there's nothin' much left now but the bare ground. No huntin', fishin', or goin' after tortles. It was as much fun as work when I was a lad, and no comin' back empty-handed, neither."

I was glad that the old man mentioned "tortles," for I thought immediately of the old story, and asked him if he had ever caught a king turtle.

"Ketch him!" he exclaimed. "Why, lad, there's only one, and nobody ever ketched him. I've seen him, though."

"Then, won't you please tell me when and where?" I asked.

Old Thornbush looked at me with an uncomfortably searching glance, as if to determine why I asked, and then remarked,—

"It was well on to forty years ago. I was down at the big bend o' the creek, where the elms hang over the water, baitin' snapper hooks, and I heard,

all of a sudden, a hissin' and splashin' ahead o' me, and, lookin' up, I see the king turtle standin' up like, in the water, and starin' right at me. His head was bigger'n my fist, and his eyes showed all the fire that was in 'em. I was more'n taken aback, for sure, and 'most fell out o' the boat, and when I looked again, I seen his shell, big as the bottom of a wash-tub, floatin' on the water, and then it sank. I knowed it was no use settin' hooks, but somehow I went on kind o' dazed like, and then started for home, but my boat wouldn't move. I shoved an oar into the mud, and it was sort o' jerked to one side, and I just missed goin' overboard. Then I knowed what was up ; old King Turtle was a-keepin' me. I got weak as a kitten, when all of a sudden the boat shot up stream, and when I c'lected my senses I set to rowin' fast as my arms would let me."

"Is that all?" I asked, for the old man suddenly stopped talking and looked steadily in the direction of which he had been speaking, for the old elms on the creek shore were plainly in view, and I could see, in imagination, all that he described.

"Ain't it enough?" he asked, and then went on as if there had been no interruption. "I went next mornin' to the place, and there wasn't a hook on any of my lines and not many o' them. Every one was cut off clean. I was a fool to leave 'em, but somehow thought I must, and I think the king turtle sort o' charms you like a sarpint does a little bird. Well, just as I was gittin' out o' the place the old turtle came up out o' the water, but not a-lookin' as

he did afore. He sort o' grinned, with his mouth wide open, and there was my hooks and bits o' lines hung round his chops like an old man's beard."

"Why didn't you shoot him?" I asked.

"Hadn't no gun with me for one thing, and wouldn't 'a' dared anyway. Why, lad, he's bullet-proof, 'course, and no man in his senses is goin' to monkey with King Turtle, if he knows it," and old Thornbush gave me a look of mingled contempt and scorn for asking such a silly question.

I did not realize at the time the force of the conviction in the old man's mind as to what he had been saying, and most untimely, therefore, was my further remark: "Do you really expect me to believe all that?"

Old Thornbush's eyes showed all the fire that was in them. He looked like the big turtle he had described, and fairly thundered, "B'lieve it or not, as you choose! But do you s'pose I've lived here all my life and hunted for fifty years and don't know what I'm a-talkin' about? If you don't b'lieve it, go tortlin' on your own hook and find out, and I bet you don't point no gun at King Turtle, if he shows up. Why, boy, don't you know that turtle purty nigh killed my daddy?"

I saw that the man was all in earnest. With him it was no mere yarn to please children, and I made amends as best I could. I mumbled a mollifying apology and the clouds passed from Thornbush's brow.

It looked like a return to glacial times as I gazed

at the wide expanse of snow-clad meadow. No ice-bound continent could have been more monotonous—I will not say dreary. The first glance reveals only the general outline, and if this be forbidding we are apt all too quickly to turn away. For the moment I saw nothing but snow, and this I could see anywhere to-day. But what is that dark object by the willow hedge? It moves as erratically as a ghost, and has no fixed shape. I look with shaded eyes and follow it to and fro, to find it is a shadow, and the bird that casts it is betwixt the meadow and the sun. So the meadows, then, had their complement of life. Ah, how little we see, even when fully bent upon seeing! The shadow was of a noble black hawk; soon it came sailing into view, and not without a purpose did it skirt the broad expanse where the willows grew. Not too near, for that would frighten all the small deer that he sought. There was not a willow-tree in sight but had a mouse's nest at its base, and every mouse would be curious to-day concerning the weather, and would creep from the warm nest in the ground up the tree-trunk, that it might have a sun-bath. Cunning black hawk! Unfortunate meadow-mice! And how the tree-sparrows pitch and tumble out of the way as the huge hawk swoops near by! He is not after them, but this they do not know; and so I miss their merry chatter when the willow hedge is reached, unless indeed they come back, for confidence returns when enemies are out of sight. Sparrows place no sentinels, and so are easily surprised. Evo-

lution has not yet made them what they should be, a little wiser in their day and generation. But the hawk has gone. Far-sighted and quick-witted crows have spied him out, and give him no peace. Their cries accord with the wild outlook of the day, and no one should ask for sweeter music. It is as deep as the baying of the hound which many profess to fancy; and how full of meaning are these battle-cries from far overhead! for the hawk has risen to a great height, but not so high that the crows cannot look down and pounce upon him.

Why is it that there is always a quarrel when crows find a hawk? These birds lead very different lives. There is no real clashing of interests. Are the crows jealous because not quick enough to catch a mouse? I do not find that crows annoy other large birds. In a little wood, filling a sink-hole in an upland field, was a heronry. Five pairs of green herons nested there, and each pair raised their brood. During the early summer, when the young birds were small and helpless, crows continually came and went, but never offered to molest the young, and never chased the old birds. I watched the spot for five months, almost daily, and saw only evidence of good will. Late in August there were more than twenty herons nightly roosting there; all day long they were continually passing to and fro from the sink-hole to the meadow, and it was seldom that a heron made the trip without meeting a crow. They may have nodded good-naturedly in passing; nothing further ever occurred, I am sure. But in November, when the

leaves had fallen and the hawks had come down from the mountains or wherever they had passed the summer, not one of them could rest for a moment in the trees if a crow happened to notice him. Immediately the alarm would be sounded, and a dozen crows, suddenly appearing, would chase the hawk away.

It was but a short distance from the willow hedge to the river-bank, but the stranger to-day could scarcely have detected where the dry land ended and the river flowed. It was as uniformly white and snow-clad as the meadows over which I had passed. Yet there was a break. A long, low line, shown by the abrupt change of level of the snow, meant the edge of the frozen river,—frozen now so firmly that horses might safely have crossed. It was here that nature was most suggestive to-day. Here were both ice and snow, and the apparently level reach of the river was not so very smooth. Uplifted cakes, many feet square, of thick ice made rough travelling for many a rod, and often effectually barred the way. Thoreau remarked after reading Kane's Arctic travels that he had seen much the same phenomena as are there described about Concord. I thought of this while walking on the river. It was no mere frozen surface of a shallow stream, but ice that bridged a valley, and so far more dangerous to loiter over. A wide crack here and there revealed what changes had been wrought, for the channel was almost dry, and, dropping down a weighted line, I found that I was forty feet above the river's bed and quite thirty

feet above high tide. The waters had found for themselves a new channel for the time, and the ice held back the tide to a great extent. It was, in short, the Ice Age come again. How glibly we talk of the Glacial period!—how little we know of it! But to-day taught something. The world here had taken a step backward, and showed how it was when man first stood upon the glacial river's banks. There were no walruses nor musk-ox, it is true, nor mastodon browsing on the sweet birch branches; but then in a sunny open spot, scarcely a mile away, there was a seal. To-day the ice had little or no mud or gravel held in its tight embrace, but I found here and there a pebble or slight trace of sand, and this was the key to the problem of whence came all the wide gravelly area, with its huge boulders and its deep deposits of clean, gritty sand. With them are mingled bones of animals, extinct, or found only in the Arctic regions; and man, too, has left unmistakable traces of himself. Even his bones are not wanting in the great gravel deposits laid down in other days, when winter was longer than summer, when there was more storm than sunshine, more snow than rain, when to all appearances we were nearer the North Pole than now.

Be it ever so exciting as we progress, the return journey is painfully commonplace. Retracing my steps, I gladly knocked at Overfield's cottage door, and entered when I heard his gruff "Come." To him I told my story of the day, and he grunted dissent from every boastful statement. The river

was not as he had seen it in his day. No, of course not. No octogenarian admits that the world is ever now as he has known it. Perhaps it is not ; but, even if born too late, I had had a pleasant walk.

With what silent fingers does the frost build up its crystal mazes ! The clear sky, the unveiled moon, the still air, all gave their aid, and slowly through the lone hours of the night the dainty frost-work was left upon every twig in the woods, every blade and seed-pod in the meadows, every weed and bush in the upland fields. Not a vine-clad fence was neglected : all the landscape was decked with jewels awaiting the sunrise of that gladdest of all days,—Christmas. The light that had for hours made the sleeping earth so beautiful now took to itself a rosy tint. The gray east grew white as the snow, and the frost-crystals in their beauty shone with a defiant glow, as if they challenged the approach of day, and then, as the sun rose, glittered, as if in anger, red as rubies ; then cast a summer-warm green light, and at last, struggling still not to be excelled, sparkled as diamonds. Never had Christmas seen a more glorious sunrise. The earth was reclothed, and, as I passed into the woods, I did not miss the leaves.

The trees bore other fruit, and the handiwork of the night demands attention before the envious day destroys it. As eager children in-doors were stripping their trees, so soon would the sunlight tear from every twig its dainty, unsubstantial jewels. It

mattered little where I stopped, these riches for the eye were everywhere. Yet there was variety. The holly does not shed its leaves, and what a spectacle that one lone tree, laden with crimson berries! Beyond, in a little clearing left by the wood-choppers years ago, the creeping blackberry matted the whole space, and every leaf was ruddy. The mullein, hibernating in a velvet gown, looked fresh as a May morning. The little beeches held fast to their golden leaves, and each was encased in crystal. Even the bubbling spring looked up with a shining face, and in its depths waved green growths,—a little flooded meadow. Christmas by the almanac, but where was winter? From a long line of low bushes which replaced a fence that had crumbled before the memory of living man came the clear, hopeful notes, the hearty good-will notes, of many a winter songster, and we have many of them. The song-sparrow that made merry in the mornings of May was no less happy now on its frosty perch. The chickadee was not content with merely lisping its happiness, but sang those clear *phc-bee* notes that are among the sweetest of all winter sounds. It is an expression of satisfaction with the world that few people, I fancy, can conscientiously repeat. It is the only known bird-song that indicates perfect happiness, and yet our mere description goes for nothing. The bird must be seen as well as heard. Indeed, this is true of all the out-door world. How tame are the brightest pages of our out-door books in comparison with an hour's ramble among the scenes we venture

to describe ! The shadows fall upon the pages, distinct at times, far oftener obscure ; but the real thing, the living fact, as yet defies our language. This very song of the passing chickadee will fall upon deaf ears ; the bird itself will flit before closed eyes, in spite of all description and the rambler's urgency that you go abroad and look and listen.



Horned Lark and Redpoll.

I had crossed a wide field before I entered the woods and saw the horned larks, and the question arises, Is it better to see birds and not hear them or hear and not see them ? It was pleasant to watch them running over the snow and sometimes plunging

into it, when, as it appeared, they trod upon some treacherous crust gathered about a low, projecting twig. These beautiful birds were, of course, not actually silent, but not every sound that comes from a bird's throat can be called a song. I have held that there is music in the cawing of a crow, but I draw the line at my neighbor's peacock. The horned larks were more than usually timid this morning, and were quite forgotten when I reached the woods.

Later, as the shadows shortened and every frost-gem faded from the sunny fields, the crested tit, that embodiment of grace, mischief, and music, came upon the scene. No author has yet done this grand bird justice. It has not been classed among the song-birds proper by those who must have the clamor of a brass band ringing in their ears while they write of music. Perhaps it is not a song-bird, but had it ever strayed to the wooded slopes of Walden pond, Thoreau would have given it a bright page in our literature. Not a song-bird, perhaps; but let that merry whistle sound through the leafless branches of the old oaks, ring through the maze of uplifted limbs of the beeches, or tremble along the weedy tangles of neglected nooks, and your winter day needs no further life to make it full as the overflowing summer. Heard to-day, it is a Christmas carol as full of meaning as the best thought of a poet's cunning brain. There is many another of these cold-defying birds, yet how few know them! Kinglets that lisp their happiness in the face of a north wind; a wren

and tree-creeper and nuthatches that do not huddle on the south side of the oaks and forever fret if there be no sunshine ; finches that chirp among the trees, cheerful as their cousins that cling to thistles in August, creatures as dainty as the summer breezes that bore their sweet songs across the hot fields and down the dusty highways. Is there not abundant reason why all of Christmas should not be spent in-doors? I have in mind a Christmas morning, crystal clear, when I stood by an old elm that held aloft a perfect labyrinth of interlacing branches that barred the sky beyond like the close grating of a prison window, and while I looked at the elm and wondered where might be hidden the birds that I heard, but could not see, suddenly there appeared a host of wee, crimson-fronted linnets, that sang with ardor all their simple songs. There was no half-hearted chirping, nor one languid movement. Had they caught the spirit of this magic date? A mere coincidence, of course, but what a pitiful fate to be born with no imagination ! Merely a bird's song to you ; but why not hear it as a veritable Christmas greeting and be glad ?

Before the sparkle of the early morning had vanished I was well on my way down the lone wood-path, and reached the unsheltered glade where once had been a cottage. The grass was yet green, and the prince's pine was as lush as the rankest of midsummer growths. The old hermit of Nottingham spent many a Christmas here, and died here on Christmas day just fifty years ago. The birds of the wildwood

were his only friends, and not one of them, it is said, feared him. They came and went in and out his open door, and not even his old dog thought of raising a paw against them. The day before the old man closely scanned the sky, and, turning, said, "Pudge, old dog, it's as sure to be a green Christmas to-morrow as that you are ugly." The dog took it all in good part, and barked assent to his master's decision.

"And we'll have the red-bird whistle and the blue-jay laugh, and you can dance in the sunshine to their music, if you choose ; as for me, I'll—" and the old man stopped at this point and gazed intently down the path. Pudge looked in the same direction, but saw nothing to bark at.

"How weak I am to be forever fancying she may come again !" muttered the old man ; and he turned towards the door of the cottage, nor looked again about him as he crossed the threshold.

It was a clear, glittering, frost-gemmed Christmas morning, as the hermit had predicted. The cardinal grosbeak whistled as never before, the blue-jays chattered, the song-sparrows sang, the crested tit and golden-crowned kinglet made merry, and the stately ruffed grouse, the old man's "pheasants," came, like chickens, close to his door, full of expectation of a hearty meal ; but the old man did not appear to welcome them, nor did the old dog bark as he had done for years. The feast of seeds and crumbs that were daily scattered was not ready for the birds to-day, and it was Christmas, too.

At noon a neighbor, bearing a letter, knocked at the door, but there was no response, and, forcing the latch, he found the hermit staring at the fireplace with sightless eyes, and Pudge, the old dog, sleeping his last sleep.

The cottage is gone ; the wild growths are encroaching upon the little glade ; lightning long since killed the stately oak that sheltered the old man's home ; but the story of the gentle hermit still re-



Ruffed Grouse.

mains, I think, handed down, year after year, by every bird of the old woods, for here they gather to sing their sweetest songs, and here, this sparkling, sunny, merry Christmas morning, I found them, red-birds and jays, nuthatches, tits, and the Carolina wren, and all seemed calling to the old man to scatter seeds and crumbs, as years ago he had done, that they, too, as well as the dwellers in-doors, might have a merry Christmas.

My outing days are well-nigh over. What I have seen in the past will but seldom be repeated in my future. In the cooped confines of a busy town I shall often recall you, my feathered friends, and long for you. Thrice happy birds, hail and farewell !

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